

## **INTEGRATING LITERATURE CIRCLES TO FACILITATE READING COMPREHENSION ON FACEBOOK GROUPS: QUESTIONING AND LEARNING PERCEPTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Literature circles are student-centered discussion groups that use various roles to make reading meaningful, comprehensible and enjoyable. The current research investigated the questioning effects and students' perceptions of integrating EFL literature circles through student-led Facebook Groups. Findings indicated that although low cognitive level thinking questions were raised more often than higher-order thinking questions, the chi-square test indicated changes in questioning types. In other words, changes in student-generated higher-order thinking questions were observed. The qualitative data indicated that students benefited from the guided structure of LC, positive group dynamics, and increased reading engagement. Nevertheless, accountability, formalistic interaction and time allocation for reading tasks should also be taken into consideration in the designing of online literature circles.

**Key Words:** literature circles, Facebook Groups, questioning

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading is not only a one-way process from the text to the reader but also a social, contextual interaction that fosters meaning, negotiation, integration, interpretation, reflection and even creation (Anderson, 1999; Ellis, 2008; Rosenblatt, 1994). Rosenblatt's reader response theory views the reading process from both the efferent and aesthetic stance. Often traditional teaching instruction focuses more on efferent stances such as extracting and retaining information from texts. In contrast to this, the aesthetic stance engages readers in making active personal connections with the text. Reading tasks should not only go beyond literal comprehension, but also value divergent personal, meaningful interpretations of the text (Chen, Chern, & Wu, 2016). Numerous

research studies have proved that reading comprehension can be amplified toward reflective reading engagement through group discussion (Chen, Wu, & Chern, 2014; Liao, 2009; Shen, 2013; Yang & Hsieh, 2015). However, language teachers cannot assume students' spontaneous interactions from efferent, aesthetic stances in group discussion without guided instruction. In most Taiwanese classrooms, students are rather reluctant in asking and responding to questions in face-to-face large-size classrooms, let alone using English as the medium for communication. Nevertheless, online literature circles (LCs) provide an alternative approach for students to discuss what they have read in a small-group setting, where English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners might feel more comfortable and confident in thinking and voicing their opinions at their own pace by taking on various roles, or reading tasks (Chiang, 2007). Furthermore, unlike traditional classroom settings where teacher-student interactions might be dominated by vocal students, online learning contexts not only provide EFL learners with opportunities to share their thoughts and ideas in a more egalitarian context but also help teachers observe, monitor, and assess the reading comprehension process.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Literature Circles in First Language**

A literature circle is a student-centered cooperative group activity that facilitates in-depth discussions, divergent thinking and interaction among students (Daniels, 2002; Schlick-Noe & Johnson, 1999). Many LC research studies based on first language have proven to be effective in improving reading comprehension skills (Avci & Yuksel, 2011, McElvain, 2010), cultivating enjoyment for reading, increasing reading motivation (Thomas, 2014), improving confidence levels and inferential reasoning (Thomas, 2014), promoting language awareness and developing a sense of belonging and higher-order thinking through cooperative learning activities among peers (McQuillan & Tse, 1997). Schlick-Noe and Johnson (1999) also advocate LC as part of a balanced, reader response-centered literacy program resulting in learner autonomy, responsibility, and ownership of reading and writing experiences.

Literature circles, commonly used in L1 classrooms, have also proven to influence students' reading engagement and promote reading

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comprehension through student-centered discussions for at-risk English language learners at elementary school and even struggling readers (Venegas, 2018). Daniels suggests four required roles in LCs to encourage students to take different stands in reading: discussion director, literary luminary, illustrator and connector. The discussion director is responsible for leading group discussions and inviting group members to comment on the reading. The role of the literary luminary is to read aloud interesting, thought-provoking, powerful passages or statements to the group. The illustrator uses diagrams, sketches or charts to illustrate how to read the text while the connector makes the connections between the text and other readings, life-related experiences or world knowledge. However, LCs do have certain drawbacks as some researchers have pointed out. For example, students' overreliance on the structured roles in LCs may impede them from taking discussions into different directions (Lin, 2010). In addition, teacher guided instruction matters. The types of prompts given by teachers influence the cognitive complexity of student responses (Thomas & Hofmeister, 2002). Also, poor group rapport and book selection can also lead to disengagement and failure of the LC (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Therefore, ongoing assessment is necessary to ensure the success and meaningfulness of LCs.

With the prevalence of Web 2.0 technologies in language learning, digital literature circles have been integrated into Edmodo (Thomas, 2014), discussion forums, and Facebook ("Facebook Lit Circles", 2014). Due to their accessibility and familiarity, teachers often integrate LC into existing learning management systems (e.g. discussion forums) or popular social network sites (e.g. FB). As Bowers-Campbell (2011) points out, in digital LC, students have more time to craft their writing, respond to peers, promote equal participation and collaborate. This leads to the construction of engaged reading processes and multimodal presentations.

### **LC with EFL University Students: From Face-to-Face to Online Context**

LC provides a well-scaffolded design to engage EFL learners in group discussion. Similar positive outcomes of LC were also shown with EFL university students in Taiwan in relation to increased reading interest (Sai & Hsu, 2007), improved reading comprehension (Shen, 2013), more independent reading practices (Su, Liang, & Tsai, 2019),

and greater critical thinking (Chen & Ho, 2018). However, the designs of LCs in Taiwanese settings differed in terms of length of implementation, participants, reading materials and discussion roles. Sai and Hsu implemented LCs with 24 EFL English-major freshmen and 14 JFL (Japanese as Foreign Language) senior Japanese majors in Taiwan for one semester. Each LC was able to choose its own members. In addition to the four required discussion roles (Daniels, 2002), weekly reading journals for reflecting in-depth on the topics in the selected readings of the LCs were required for grading. The survey results revealed that both EFL and JFL groups were satisfied with the LC in terms of increased reading interests and reading comprehension of the text. These researchers compiled possible factors influencing the success of the LCs with college students in Taiwan, including self-selection of reading materials, students' preference of discussion roles, in-class discussion time, teacher feedback of student journal writing and grading policy. Both researchers called for a more elastic approach and a longitudinal study of LCs with university EFL students in Taiwan. Chen and Ho's (2018) recent study with 36 non-English majors of technological university students in Taiwan over a five-week span also validates LC roles such as discussion director, summarizer, connector and illustrator, in promoting thinking beyond literal comprehension.

With the increased use of online learning environments to facilitate student-centered learning in out-of-class discussions, university teachers of EFL students have begun to integrate virtual LCs in order to promote language proficiency, peer interaction, and reading comprehension in an online context. Chiang (2007) pioneered a year-long study of virtual LCs via a threaded discussion board with 54 high-level EFL freshmen in Taiwan. Participating students improved in their general English proficiency and English reading comprehension at a significant level. The majority of Chiang's students viewed virtual LC as a useful and effective approach to improve their reading, and particularly, their writing skills. Chiang suggested future research include a mixed approach of in-class literacy discussions and virtual LCs. Furthermore, Chiang stressed that when implementing virtual LCs, the instructor needs to provide concrete modeling, linguistic support to initiate literacy discussion, and full integration of LCs into the existing curriculum rather than as an additional isolated reading activity.

Additionally, a recent research study with 285 sophomore EFL students in China validated the positive correlation of self-regulation,

particularly goal-setting and self-evaluation, on undergraduate students' attitudes in a collaborative wiki-based environment (Su, Liang, & Tsai, 2019). This pioneer study of wiki-based LCs provided empirical evidence that goal-setting and self-evaluation strategies were positively correlated with the attitude of the success of wiki-based LCs. Nevertheless, further investigation of cognitive processes with EFL students in social network sites is necessary in order to effectively evaluate levels of thinking occurring in LCs.

#### **Questioning in EFL-LC Context**

Questioning, a critical cognitive process, is essential in fostering reading comprehension at varying levels of knowledge construction. Substantial research findings have proved the importance of questioning in facilitating reading comprehension, knowledge construction and quality of peer interaction across grade levels (Joseph, Alber-Morgan, Cullen, & Rouse, 2016; Wong, 1985; Yang & Hsieh, 2015). When asking questions, students not only activate their prior knowledge but also selectively pay attention in identifying interrelationships between ideas from various sections of the text to form conceptual knowledge structures (Anderson, 1999). Commonly known cognitive processes are a revised Bloom's Taxonomy of School Learning: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (Anderson et al., 2001). Lower-order thinking often refers to remembering, understanding, and applying-types of questions. EFL students who struggle in lower-order thinking (i.e. micro-structure) questions often encounter difficulties in building a coherent representation of text in a macro-structure because they are likely to fail in integrating main ideas in a conceptual and organized manner (Anderson, 1999). In contrast, higher-order thinking ones are closely associated with deep-learning processes such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Therefore, effective language teachers need to be aware of constructing language contexts tailored to the needs of reading comprehension that promotes both micro- and macro- levels of knowledge building (Chu, 2015). In other words, designing language learning environments that facilitate divergent and convergent thinking optimizes reading comprehension and joy of reading with others and the text.

Therefore, types of thinking or discussion questions should also be taken into consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of online LCs.

Contrary to the prevalence of lower-order thinking questions in traditional classrooms, higher-order thinking questions should also be valued in online LCs. Liao (2009) examined 26 freshmen's lower-order and higher-order thinking questions on Windows Live Messenger (MSN) and compared it with 31 freshman students in face-to-face LCs for one year. Based on the pre- and post- self-assessment of a critical thinking survey, students in both groups perceived their increased ability in raising higher-order thinking questions after the implementation of LCs. Analysis of student-generated questions on MSN also indicated an improvement in writing higher-order thinking questions in both settings. Participating students' comments on the merits of online LCs mentioned ample time to craft higher-order thinking questions, and supportive, less anxious language learning environments. In terms of the roles, the connector role was considered the most useful in allowing students to make meaningful connections to their real-life experience. Nevertheless, Liao also stressed the importance of explicit teaching of questioning and online monitoring of students' engagement and progress toward critical thinking. With the increasing demand of English as the lingua franca, LCs are a useful approach to formulate thinking at various levels under guided instruction and practice. Hence, a blended approach of face-to-face and online LCs would be the most optimal for learning outcomes. In spite of the potential strengths of LCs for L1 and EFL students, studies of integrating LCs with EFL university students via Facebook (FB) are lacking (Chiang, 2007; Liao, 2009) and need to be explored further to evaluate the thinking process through questioning.

Choice of the means of communication, whether asynchronous or synchronous, could also be influential and significant to learning outcomes (Hou et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2012). Compared with online discussion forums embedded in university-based learning management systems, Hou et al. (2015) also found that FB facilitated more subject-focused continuous discussion for Taiwanese university students. The features such as RSS news feeds, notification and "Thumb up" not only provide updated information in a timely manner but also motivate member engagement and reinforce social presence in strengthening the online learning community through their mobile phones. Social presence has played a critical factor in students' engagement with FB (Cheung et al., 2011; Hou et al., 2015). Due to its user-friendly, collaborative, and interactive nature, studies on using Facebook pages for university courses and Facebook groups in facilitating students' academic learning

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experiences as well as collaborative learning have been promising (Irwin et al., 2012; Shih, 2011). However, some researchers (Junco, 2012; Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010) claim that it should be used with caution because a negative relationship has been observed between students' academic outcomes (i.e. GPA) and FB use or time. Hence, studies on using FB for educational purposes are still inconclusive.

As a result, the intention of the current study is to fill the gap on the effects of integrating EFL LCs with FB for educational purposes with university students in Taiwan in terms of student-generated discussion questions and students' perceptions. The following research questions were proposed: (1) Are there any differences in student questioning before and after the mid-point of the semester in terms of lower- and higher-order thinking questions? (2) What do EFL students consider to be the strengths and weaknesses of LCs on FB Groups?

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Participants**

Thirty-eight EFL students were recruited from a Freshman English Reading course. Participating EFL students had an average score of 65.4 in the high-intermediate General English Proficiency Reading Test (B1, CEFR). At the beginning of the semester, these participating English majors formed their own LCs, with four members in each group. Throughout the semester, based on students' postings, teacher feedback of students' online questioning and engagement was given through in-class mini-lessons (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Schlick-Noe & Johnson, 1999). Exemplary student works of different roles were also displayed on FB Group and shared with students in mini-lessons to strengthen the rapport of the online learning community. In order to create an authentic learning community, EFL students of equivalent English proficiency (CSEPT, 220-239) from another university were invited to participate in the online FB Groups. The corresponding 40 students were non-English major seniors enrolled in an Intermediate Senior General English course from a joint university. Majors of the seniors varied from Applied Chinese and Communication Arts, to Foreign Language Instruction. Senior students in the joint university were completing their fourth year four-credit General English course. The researcher hoped to achieve an optimal learning community by integrating interdisciplinary and

inter-university LC context.

### **Instructional Design**

The online LC was structured as follows. First, orientation meetings on Facebook LC were conducted at the beginning of the semester. Students chose their group members, formed groups of four to practice LCs in class, and then rotated those roles weekly in online LCs. The following major roles were used in LCs: discussion director, connector, illustrator, and literary luminary (Daniels, 2002). Optional LC roles were also shared with students through 20-minute mini-lessons (Daniels & Steineke, 2004) in class such as summarizer, vocabulary finder and, investigator (Daniels, 2002). In addition to role posting, each student was also required to reply to questions posted by the discussion director as well as to at least one peer's comments. Finally, students of each LC were given opportunities to share highlights of their discussion in class. In order to assist students who might encounter reading or writing difficulties, a student tutor was also available online whenever students were in need of understanding the role of the LC and posting replies on FB Groups. In addition, the researcher also offered weekly counseling hours to assist students.

Jane Eyre was chosen as the reader because of the level of readability and universal themes in this simplified novel of 31,360 words, approximately equivalent to the B2 level of CEFR. Students from the joint university were invited to take part in the assigned FB LC on a weekly basis. The primary roles of the 40 seniors in the joint university were to reply to the questions posted by the 38 English majors at the researcher's university and to discuss issues or themes raised from the 10-weekly assigned online LC sessions. As a result, ten LCs were created on separate FB Groups, each with an average of six to eight members in each group, four English majors from the researcher's university and four non-English major students from the joint university to achieve optimal online interactions. The implementation of the LC cycle can be viewed in Figure 1.



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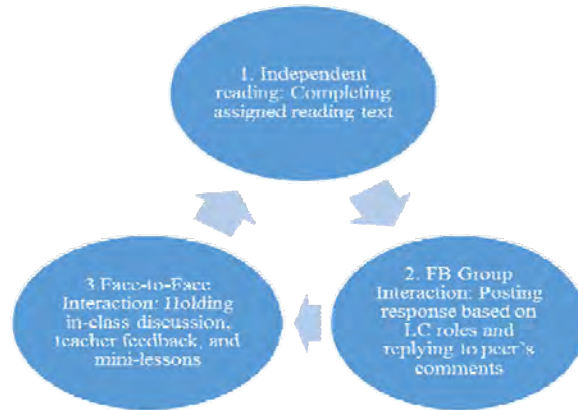


Figure 1. Implementation procedure of LC

### Research Instrument

The researchers wanted to see whether EFL students had made significant improvements in generating both higher-order and lower-order thinking questions at the conclusion of the online LC. Therefore, a chi-square test was performed to examine statistical significance.

As a participant observer, I recorded field observations involving direct in-class and online observation of student interactions. Following the completion of the online LC, interviews were undertaken to gain further insight into the impacts of LCs in terms of instructional design, reading enjoyment, group interactions, and challenges.

A survey consisting of 18 five-point scale and three open-ended questions was administrated in class after the completion of reading to evaluate the usefulness of LC elements in an online context, including adjustment made for taking part in FB Groups, personal fulfillment of LC learning tasks, online peer interaction, effects of online tasks, comparison to other LC modes, and overall evaluation of LC. The survey questions were discussed with another experienced researcher to establish validity and a satisfactory result of internal reliability from the 68 returned surveys was reached (Cronbach's alpha = .80). The three open-ended questions were related to students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of, and suggestions for, online LCs.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data analysis was done in the following steps. First, all student-generated questions on each FB Group were organized using Excel according to chronological order. Furthermore, to enhance the reliability of coding for the types of student online questions based on the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), another experienced native English teacher was invited to be another coder for all student-generated online questions. After three coding sessions, initial coding schemes were refined and the final intercoder reliability reached 95.9%. Disagreements were resolved at the end of the coding. Next, a chi-square analysis was conducted to investigate whether there were changes in the types of student-generated questions and perceptions of the online LC before and after the mid-point of the semester. Furthermore, a constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007) was used to systematically identify emerging themes across all qualitative data sources such as student reflections, online messages, surveys, student interviews and the researcher's field observations on Nvivo 10 qualitative data analysis software. Open-ended comments from the survey were categorized by themes and the frequency of the themes were also calculated to provide support for qualitative data. Data collected from open-ended survey questions were coded and analyzed based on the frequency to depict the quantitative aspects of the majority of the students' learning experience. Therefore, coding from the open-ended survey questions yielded 155 comments in six main categories. Moreover, ten students from both universities were recruited for further interviews based on a volunteer basis after the completion of the project. The interview data were used as a supplementary source for understanding the process of LC discussions. Nevertheless, the trustworthiness of the qualitative data analysis was reassured and discussed with the teacher researcher at the joint university. In the following sections, the names of the students have been replaced with pseudonyms.

## **RESULTS**

### **Changes Observed in Lower-order and Higher-order Thinking Questions**

A total of 256 questions were collected from Facebook Groups

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generated by the researcher’s students. Based on the revised Bloom’s taxonomy as indicated in Table 1, the majority (71.1%, 182) of these student-generated questions were lower-order thinking questions, mainly remembering, followed by understanding, and applying-type questions. Close to one-third (28.91%, 74) of the questions were higher-order thinking questions. Table 1 demonstrates the frequency of each level of student questions.

Table 1

*Frequency of Questions in Each Level*

Level	Frequency	Example of questions
<i>Lower-order thinking</i>		
1. Remembering	83 (32.4%)	Who died in the red room?
2. Understanding	80 (31.3%)	In your opinion, why did St. John try so hard to suppress his feelings towards Miss Oliver?
3. Applying	19 (7.4%)	Would you consider Mr. Rochester a burden in your life? Why/Why not?
<i>Higher-order thinking</i>		
4. Analyzing	53 (20.7%)	What are the similarities between St. John and John Reed?
5. Evaluating	20 (7.8%)	Did Jane make the right or wrong decision in the end? Why or Why not?
6. Creating	1 (0.4%)	A different ending.

A Chi-square test was also performed to examine the relation of student-led discussion questions before and after the mid-term exam which signaled the mid-point for the implementation of the online LC via FB Group. The relation of students’ question types in before- and after- mid-term discussion was significant,  $\chi^2 (5, N = 256) = 19.97, p < .001$ . Findings from Table 2 indicate that students had made more higher-order thinking questions during the second-half (38.5%) than the first-half (20.8%) of the semester.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for the Frequency of Six Types of Questions*

Mid-term	Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyze	Evaluate	Create
Before	55 (39.6%)	41 (29.5%)	14 (10.1%)	17 (12.2%)	12 (8.6%)	0 (0%)
After	28 (23.9%)	39 (33.3%)	5 (4.3%)	36 (30.8%)	8 (6.8%)	1 (.9%)

**Students' Perceptions: Strengths of the EFL Literature Circles**

In the following sections, major findings of student perceptions are presented with qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were mainly from the open-ended survey questions, field observations, student reflections, and interviews. Results from the qualitative data revealed three categories as the strengths of the online LC. A total of 98 comments from 65 students were coded. Those categories consist of the guided structure of the LC, positive group dynamics, and reading engagement as shown in Table 3.

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Table 3

*Categories of the EFL students' perceptions as strengths of LC*

Categories	Themes	Excerpts
1. Guided structure of LC	a. LC roles	I am really into the role of "connector" because of the creativity. I got to share my favorite film into the discussion.
	b. Assigned reading	Assigned reading chapters.
	c. Enhanced comprehension	Have more understanding of the content in Jane Eyre. Some peers are good at describing the plot and illustrate the connections of characters and events.
	d. Divergent thinking	Learn various perspectives from in-class discussions with teachers and peers.
2. Positive group dynamics	a. Convenience and timely response	Like to interact on FB because of convenience and accessibility via mobile phone.
	b. Peer collaboration	Like the feeling of collaboration.
	c. Inter-university context	I enjoy discussing on FB and exchanging ideas with students in other school. In addition, all exchanges were kept online for later inquiries.
3. Reading engagement	a. Interesting text	A very interesting book
	b. Meaningful reading	Essentially, this is a good online activity which encourages students to read more and do theme-based reflections.
	c. Motivation	Promote self-regulation of outside reading.

*Guided structure of LC.*

In terms of reading comprehension, the majority of the researcher's

participants agreed that discussion with peers in the LC facilitated their understanding of reading materials ( $M = 3.65$ ). They agreed that they had become familiar with the roles and tasks of the LC ( $M = 3.67$ ). Furthermore, they considered it beneficial to take on different roles to enhance their understanding of the reading ( $M = 3.52$ ). Similarly, close to sixty percent (58.5%, 38) of the comments from open-ended survey questions centered on the advantages of the guided structure of the LC. In contrast with a free online discussion structure, the guided LC roles facilitate literacy analysis and interpretation from multiple perspectives. "I like the way students in the other university took on different roles in interpreting the novel," said Yolanda from the joint university. She explained, "The structure helped us identify what and how to reply to discussion" (interview). Although students in the joint university did not receive training on how to use the LC, they were informed of the different roles and related responsibilities from their teacher prior to taking the online LC. In general, students found those role rotations useful and relevant in the meaning-making process. Kim liked being the discussion director the most. Her competence in guiding peers exploring and investigating critical questions as discussion director encouraged other group members to take on honorary discussion leader roles (interview). The structure of taking on various roles did increase students' reading comprehension, appreciation of literature, and contribution to making divergent, yet meaningful connections to their lives (field observation). On the other hand, assigning chapters to read in advance helped set clear learning objectives. For example, "compared to self-chosen reading, I prefer reading the same book as a class and with a unified reading schedule," commented Jessie (survey).

The guided structure of the LC also led to growth in learning, including active reading comprehension, writing skills, and creativity. Mary commented that in-class and online discussion led to a "better and in-depth understanding of the main characters" (interview). As for Bonnie, "Asking questions inspires me to think on a deeper level. Furthermore, it helps me notice things I may not pay attention to when first reading it" (reflection). Some students became aware of personal gains in writing. As David put it, "I was quite proud of myself of being able to write something totally different...the purpose of writing is not to pass a writing exam. The story ended when you finished the exam. Here (LC) writing could be so multi-faceted" (reflection). Increased comprehension was also observed from multimodal forms of

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presentation such as character comparison charts or comic strips. In addition, LC discussions ignited divergent thinking. With learner-centered LCs, various voices were valued. A student commented that LC enable him to “see things from multiple angles” (survey). Nevertheless, ongoing intervention such as mini-lessons during class was critical in valuing different voices as well as assessing personal progress.

#### *Positive group dynamics.*

In general, students established good social rapport with group members ( $M = 3.35$ ). Likewise, the LC did facilitate peer interaction and collaboration ( $M = 3.58$ ) and, by interacting with others, students learned to respect others’ voices and opinions ( $M = 3.97$ ). Group dynamics in the LC are closely connected to the importance of building a relationship of trust and peer rapport as claimed by over one-third of students’ (46.2%, 30) comments on the survey. With the digital natives, the easy access via phone was considered “very convenient for immediate reply” (survey). Contrary to paper-based homework, students can be notified online of unread messages and reply at once, which may help cultivate group rapport and cohesion. As one student mentioned “every member is very cooperative in another school. Such a pleasure to work with them” (survey). When students allocated time to building a relationship of trust with their peers online, they often felt secure, communicated at ease and were much more willing to engage in discussion, regardless of the language proficiency.

Peer support acted as another positive reinforcement for constructing a learning community. “Being a responsible member is very important. It means you need to finish your reading on time...I even felt guilty when I did not do my part of the group work”, said Elsa (interview). Initially, Elsa was reluctant to be engaged in an online community but gradually developed friendships with peers as they increased contacts with each other on a weekly basis. At the end of the project, Elsa joyfully said that “they are my friends who lifted me up in times of need” (field observation). Leah, being aware of her low English proficiency compared with her group members, strived hard in brainstorming and writing FB responses. “Thinking is the part which I do not usually get to practice often but when taking on the role as a discussion director, I actually had to think ‘very hard’ for good questions to increase participation for my group members” (interview).

Additionally, the inter-university context provided an opportunity for

additional group support, be it academically, or emotionally. Active involvement of group members in an online community also helped clarify misconceptions or misunderstandings in a timely and friendly manner. For example, Leah said that “It was nice to have group members. One time I misunderstand the main plots and characters in the story. My group members quickly reminded me and tell me to look up from specific page numbers. I am glad to have them” (interview). Positive comments and support were observed frequently from her group members on FB (field observation).

***Reading engagement.***

According to the survey, students agreed that they enjoyed learning more from the LC than paper-and-pencil tests ( $M = 3.33$ ). Students considered the experience helpful in cultivating positive English reading habits ( $M = 3.74$ ). In addition, there were no technical difficulties encountered when students took part in LC discussions online ( $M = 3.94$ ). In like fashion, over one-third (36.9%, 24) of students’ comments from the open-ended survey centered on reading motivation because reading was not only appropriate to their reading proficiency, but also filled with numerous intriguing topics. The selection of text contains the power to move the reader. An interesting text is surely the stepping stone to reading engagement (field observation). Some students claimed the plot of *Jane Eyre* is “as intense as that of a prime-time Taiwanese soap opera” (interview). According to Chris, the LC triggered his learner autonomy. He explained that the clear weekly reading goals guided him in knowing “exactly what is expected, when, and how to do it before the deadline” (reflection).

Reading became more meaningful as students demonstrated a change in reading attitudes when they collectively took initiative beyond the classroom setting. As Jenny put it, “Group discussion forces me to boost my reading power. Before I was a passive reader...now I need to be prepared for discussion” (interview). Jenny further explained that her transitioning from passive reader to active one was beneficial to her reading comprehension and writing competence.

Moreover, compared to paper-based tests, LC motivated learners to engage in extended personal exploration. Some students even went the extra mile in taking on additional roles such as investigator, to gather more background information about the author and summarized themes discussed from the book (field observation). Thus, shared reading



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experience triggered some learners to embark on voluntary information searching and interpretation.

**Students' Perceptions: Weaknesses of the EFL Literature Circles**

After triangulation across qualitative data sources, three recurring categories regarding difficulties and challenges students encountered emerged from the data. In terms of the weakness of LCs mentioned by 56 students, 57 comments were analyzed as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Categories of the EFL Students' Perceptions as Weaknesses of LC*

Categories	Themes	Excerpts
1. Individual accountability	a. No posting	Some did not show up at all. Others did not take part in discussion, not even clicking the Like button.
	b. Peer rapport	Some group members have low participation rate. They do not even bother to give me thumbs-up.
	c. Untimely reply	Without replies, it becomes less interesting.
2. Formalistic interaction	a. Lack of in-depth discussion	Some postings were too easy and vague.
	b. Face-to-face interaction	Compared to FB, I prefer face-to-face discussion.
3. Overloaded reading tasks	a. Weekly reading	It took me a long time to read the assigned reading chapters.
	b. Writer's block	Encounter writing difficulties.

**Low Level of Individual Accountability.**

When students were asked if they had followed the teacher's assigned schedule to reply to others' postings, responses from the researcher's students showed a slightly negative trend ( $M = 2.9$ ). Coding of the open-ended survey questions also showed that over half of the students (51.8%, 29) considered accountability as the major challenge in an online LC. The majority of those accountability problems led to a lack of interaction and untimely replies, or even emotional distress. For example, Frank was upset when peers "never showed up online" and felt frustrated (reflection). Similarly, Yani encountered the same predicament. "My group members do not bother to post. They simply do not care. I am the only one to post questions. Who do I reply to? Myself?" (interview) Yani's members did not show up often in class and did not complete the online discussion (field observation). Similarly, Betty murmured, "they do not even bother to give me a 'thumb up' for my posting (reflection). Nana, from the joint university, complained that "there are no questions posted by the CCU students. What shall we reply?" (interview) In other words, when group members did not finish the reading on time, students in the joint university would be stuck asking and replying to their own peers in class. This defeated the purpose of a joint LC online project. In addition, when a posting was submitted after the deadline, there would be no replies to those delayed postings. Consequently, students who posted on time would complain and felt frustrated by the lack of participation and support from peers (survey). On top of that, online flaming was observed in one LC resulting from receiving no response from the joint university (field observation). Tension then increased among group members and hindered the development of trust in the group and, therefore, prevented a good rapport throughout the semester (survey).

**Formalistic Interaction.**

The design of the online LC was criticized by close to one-fourth (23.2%, 13) of the students in the survey in terms of questioning type and its relation to authentic interaction. Students seemed to prefer face-to-face rather than online LCs ( $M = 3.21$ ). The type of questions also played another key role in the flow of the discussion. It is, without a doubt, easy to generate lower-level thinking questions such as literal

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questions or close-ended questions. Consistent with the empirical data in Table 1, lower-level thinking questions (71.1%) were observed more often than higher-level ones (28.9%). Hence, it would be difficult to have more integrated and coherent discussions with lower-level questions. Peggy, from the joint university, commented that “the type of questions raised ... not much room for discussion. We need more questions that we can discuss in-depth ... It takes time to practice” (interview). Because it was part of the course requirements, some students did view taking part in the LC outside of class merely as a unilateral assignment. As a result, their messages consisting of literal, low-level thinking questions led to irritation from students at the joint university. “When reading the questions from CCU students, sometimes the questions are too superficial as if they are just doing it for the sake of turning in the assignment” (survey). Reading a novel is one thing but sharing and discussing with online peers is another. In addition, engaging in more in-depth discussion, which seemed to be more time-consuming and involved more writing and thinking processes, was not something most students accustomed to traditional one-time online homework submission procedures were used to. Therefore, it was observed that some group discussions were fragmented and lacked coherence (online posting). In other words, sometimes students were focusing too much on the details rather than the themes crafted by the author. Students with low English proficiency often strived at a low level of comprehension. Without a thorough understanding of the text, they were incapable of achieving a more complex level of asking higher-order thinking questions (Anderson, 1999). The teacher’s field observations summarized the prevalence of a certain type of LC discussion context on FB. “Some of those discussions seem to resemble Q&A questions. Do my students really grasp the true meaning of good discussion questions?” (field observation) Therefore, formalistic interactions, in which posts and responses resemble question and answer sections, undermine the genuine interaction to foster in-depth discussion. It should be noted that constructing higher-order thinking questions is as demanding as responding with thoughtful insights, especially for those with lower English proficiency.

#### **Overloaded Reading Tasks.**

The students’ compliance to the reading of other’s online postings on

a weekly basis received a neutral rating ( $M = 3.0$ ). Likewise, close to one-fifth of students (19.6%, 11) in the survey mentioned that assignments on the LC for this General Education course gave them a lot of pressure in terms of the amount of reading and due dates to post questions and reply. Kenny commented that he “took a LOT of time in doing LC assignment. Compared with my other classes, this is too much work” (survey). He further commented that “students in another university should also share the responsibilities of LC roles” (survey). Since the researcher’s university has a unified Freshman English reading curriculum, the participating students were required to complete reading assignments from the course textbook as well as take part in the online LC on a regular basis. As a result, the pressure could sometimes spoil the fun of reading. Even though extra counseling hours were provided throughout the semester, not many students signed up to seek extra help from the teacher (field observation). On the other hand, some students expressed feeling anxious and fatigued from weekly reading assignments and writing responses to their peers (survey). This was an especially more demanding task for students with low English proficiency. Hence, it is essential to strike a balance between the amount of reading text, the allocation of online discussion time and the adjustment of task difficulties for both high- and low- EFL students when designing online LCs.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study explored the possibility of integrating LC instructional design with EFL university students in an inter-university context as they took on different roles to discuss a novel from various perspectives and construct and negotiate meanings in an online community through student-centered FB Groups. Findings have demonstrated that the structure of LCs has the potential of increasing students’ awareness of asking higher-order thinking questions, facilitating reading engagement, developing meaningful reading experience and enhancing positive group dynamics in a FB online learning community. In the following sections, major findings along with pedagogical implications are addressed in comparison with other relevant research studies.

### **Promotion of Higher-order Thinking Questions**

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EFL university students in the current study used more higher-order thinking questions (28.91%, 74) when compared with 11.42% (26), 8.45% (24) in the study done by Hou et al. (2015) with students discussing subject knowledge on online discussion forums and FB in Mandarin, their native language (L1), the same L1 as the participating EFL students in this study. Questioning is, without a doubt, an integral part in LCs. Through questioning, reading becomes interactive and retrospective. However, the types of questioning influence the quality and momentum of the discussion it follows (Yang & Hsieh, 2015). In the current study, in the early stage of the LC, literal reading comprehension questions were often generated. However, with ongoing assessments (e.g. mini-lessons), high-level thinking questions were also observed. The current study provided empirical evidence of improvement in students' questioning, especially higher-order thinking questions after implementation of the LC for one semester. Nevertheless, learning to master the skills needed to engage in quality online discussion and writing coherent responses takes time and practice.

### **Student Perceptions of LC on FB: From Design to Implementation**

The current study confirmed that integrating LCs with FB Groups for academic purposes could be achieved with a scaffolded instructional design, creation of positive group dynamics, and reading engagement. The design of integrating LCs with Facebook Groups is not only feasible but also supported by empirical evidence in this study. Consistent with previous studies with EFL students (Sai & Hsu, 2007; Shen, 2013), the structure of LCs serves as an effective scaffolding and guideline for university EFL students to initiate discussion and willingness to communicate on FB Groups. The different roles structured by LCs provide a framework for EFL students to appreciate literature from various perspectives. This echoes Rosenblatt's (1995) reader response theory that "text is just ink on a page until a reader comes along and gives it life" (Daniels, 2002, p. 37). Reading becomes active in this meaning-making process with the text and others. To facilitate EFL students' interaction with the text, LCs provide a solid foundation with guided instruction for them.

Students could read from various perspectives by taking on various roles as well as in meaning-negotiation with peers. In order to foster

positive group dynamics as revealed in student perceptions, learners need to fulfill specific reading goals in advance such as completing assigned reading and responding to LC roles (Daniels, 2002). In other words, LCs require self-regulated learning. Consistent with previous studies with EFL students in Taiwan (Liao, 2009; Wang, 2009), accountability is also the most frequently recurring theme in the current study. Likewise, most EFL students in Chiang's (2007) study agreed that a reading schedule prompted them to read English on a regular basis. In other words, this extrinsic motivation of fulfilling the LC requirements seemed to facilitate the development of reading habits and for some students, encourage the development of autonomous reading habits and an appreciation of literature. Therefore, it is essential for group members to develop a good rapport, build a good relationship of trust at the very beginning, and always be prepared in terms of finishing the reading text and writing up the posting before the scheduled time for group discussion.

Although students from the joint university did not receive instructional training for the LC in this study, they were informed of the various roles and their responsibilities before starting the online LC. It is critical to set clear guidelines and assessment for online discussion, especially on netiquette. Although the researcher had addressed ground rules for netiquette at the onset of the study, the regular monitoring and providing feedback from the teacher were still critical for addressing issues and concerns raised in a timely manner. When collaborating with a class in an inter-university context, a teacher researcher does need to commit an above average amount of time to coordinating, administering, monitoring, assessing and providing timely support to ensure the quality and flow of student-centered online LC discussion groups. Nevertheless, ample time should be provided for group discussion online (Lin et al., 2013). In this study, an elastic approach could be used in adjusting the number of online LC times and choices of LC roles (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Adjustment in the number of online discussions and matching of student language proficiency across two institutions should also be considered. Finally, student self-assessment and peer evaluation could also be useful in engaging learners in monitoring and adjusting their individual language learning process.

In summary, findings from successful LC groups indicated a well-organized momentum, in which group members were fully aware of their schedule, reading plan (e.g. group due date and discussion date),

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and individual responsibilities. Overall, the online LC was considered beneficial in generating higher-order thinking questions and reading from an aesthetic stance for both the less proficient as well as proficient EFL students. Types of questions raised by students also influenced the flow of discussion to some degree. For example, close-ended questions were often found to be difficult for generating in-depth discussion and fostering positive group dynamics. It should also be noted that active participants in most less successful LCs expressed their powerlessness in bringing less-active peers into LC discussion because of their failure in fulfilling their personal responsibility of finishing the assigned reading on time. Therefore, a more flexible online LC design could be constructed to balance the amount of reading tasks, allocation of time for online peer interaction, and in-class instruction.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The study had a few limitations. First, the current study focused on students' questioning and perceptions of online LC among EFL students of intermediate proficiency in Taiwan. Due to the limited number of participants and focus of the LC discussion on one novel, the findings cannot be generalized to expository texts and EFL student populations of other proficiencies. Second, a longitudinal study and more reading texts could be implemented to grasp the long-term impact of LCs with Facebook Groups. Third, the limited research instruments may have restricted the scope of measuring the effectiveness of online LCs. Further studies could incorporate different research instruments and methods to form a holistic point of view on the impacts of online LC discussion groups. Furthermore, different findings may be observed when different means of communication are used. Finally, the significant differences found in the study should be interpreted with caution. The maturity of students and time requirements may have influenced the outcomes found in the data.

### **CONCLUSION**

The current study explored the questioning effect and student perceptions in integrating online LC via FB Group with EFL students at two different universities in Taiwan. Students generally considered the

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design of LC to be beneficial in increasing their reading engagement, cultivating peer interaction, and improving their appreciation of literature by sharing and discussing themes from the literary text. This study showed that EFL students were capable of organizing LCs, initiating meaningful discussion with peers through questioning, and developing good peer rapport through LC Facebook Groups. However, when constructing LCs, the instructor needs to draw attention in various ways to cultivate individual accountability, foster group dynamics and adjust the reading tasks in order to enhance higher-order thinking through coherent and meaningful online literature circle discussions.



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