

Cognitive and Affective Contributions of the Literature Circles Method on the Acquisition of Reading Habits and Comprehension Skills in Primary Level Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the effect of literature circles on fourth grade primary students' reading habits and comprehension skills and collected the opinions of students and teachers about the method. In this study, quantitative (pre-test and post-test designs) and qualitative (case study) methods were employed together. The study was conducted on 72 students in the fourth grade of a private school in Istanbul. The data were collected through focus group interviews conducted with teachers and students using "Semi-structured interview forms" and a "reading comprehension scale". The reading comprehension scale was administered as pre-test and post-test. A dependent group's t test was employed for the analysis of the scale scores, and a structured reporting technique was used for the analysis of interview data. The findings of the study showed that the literature circles method improved the reading comprehension skills of students who had low level reading comprehension. It was also found out that students liked reading books by performing different tasks, discussing and cooperating with their friends over a period of time. Students stated that they remembered the book they had read with all the details even two weeks later. The book presentation projects were found beneficial by the students who had prepared them and their audience.

Key Words

Literature Circles, Reading Comprehension, Reading Habit.

Literature Circles (RC) is a teaching method in which students discuss the parts of the books they read at certain intervals in groups formed according to the books they chose (Daniels, 2002). It is a combination of individual reading and collaborative learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2006). It is a teaching method differentiated in terms of implementation (Tomlinson & Strickland, 2005). It is theoretically based on constructivism and socio-cultural theory (Hsu, 2004; Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

The process of RC starts with book selection (Carpinelli, 2006; Daniels, 2002). Then, books are introduced to the students, and they are asked to choose the book appropriate for them (Daniels, 2002; Neamen & Strong, 2001). In accordance with the choices, groups containing 2-6 students are formed (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Daniels, 2002). In the first meeting, students decide on how many pages they will read in a day, distribute the roles and determine the project type. The parts read by the students are discussed in the following meetings. The subject of the discussions is determined by students in the meetings (Daniels, 2002; Moeller & Moeller, 2007). After they finish reading the book, groups present their projects to the class (Moeller & Moeller, 2007). The teacher has a guiding role in all these processes (Alwood, 2000; Daniels, 2002; Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999). Authentic assessment is utilized in this method (Daniels, 2003).

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In RC, roles are used in order to maintain group discussions within the required frame (Daniels, 1994; Straits, 2007; Tracey & Morrov, 2006). Commonly used roles are interrogator, group leader, connector and artist, researcher, word-hunter, summarizer, stage editor, master of character, observer and film critic (Daniels, 1994, 2002; Straits, 2007; Tracey & Morrov, 2006). Students share what they did about their tasks in the group discussion (DaLie, 2001; Moeller & Moeller, 2007; Tracey & Morrow, 2006).

The method is quite effective in getting children to adopt reading habits (Burda, 2000; Chiang & Huang, 2005) and endearing them to reading (Culli, 2002; Olsen, 2007; Pitton, 2005; Rutherford, Carter, Hillmer, Kramer, & Parker, 2009). In addition, it improves the reading skills (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002; Chiang & Huang, 2005; Stabile, 2009) and reading comprehension skills (Mizerka, 1999; Blum et al., 2002) of the students.

RC is mostly used in language education in all formal education levels from primary education first grade (Knowles & Smith, 2003). Moreover, it is preferred by informal education institutions teaching foreign language (Furr, 2003).

Although the efficiency of RC has been proved by much research, it has not yet come into use in Turkey; therefore, the present study is the first of its kind in the country. The findings of the study will be useful for teachers who want to implement the RC method in their classes.

This study aims to examine the effect of reading circles on primary education fourth grade students' reading habits and reading comprehension skills and analyses the opinions of students and teachers about the method. The research questions of the study are; (1) "What is the extent of the effect of RC on the reading comprehension skill?". (2) "What are the perceptions of teachers and students about the benefits of the method?". (3) "What are the attitudes of teachers and students towards RC?". (4) "What are the opinions of teachers and students about group projects?". (5) "What are the opinions of teachers and students about the system of assessment?".

Method

Research Model

In this study, quantitative (pre-test and post-test designs) and qualitative (case study) methods were employed together. The case study method is in-depth investigation of the event at the mo-

ment when it takes place and in a real life situation (Stake, 1995 cited in Bassey, 1999). This method was used because it provides consistent in-depth data pertaining to the case being researched from a broad perspective (Yin, 2003).

The Study Group

The study was conducted on 72 students in the fourth grade (in 4A, 4B, and 4C classroom) of a private school in Istanbul and three classroom teachers. This private school was chosen because one of the researchers was working at this school and it was easy to get permission for the research.

Data Collection Tools

Reading Comprehension Scale: The scale developed by Çiftçi (2007) was employed in order to measure the reading comprehension skills of the students. The reliability coefficient of the original scale was .88. Since it would take too much time to answer all of the 102 questions in the scale, only 30 of these questions were used in the present study. The reliability coefficient of the scale in this study was .79.

Semi-structured Student Interview Form: Regarding the information from a literature survey, the researchers prepared five target questions after consulting experts in the field. The questions aimed to elicit student opinions about RC. The questions concerned the student's previous practices of reading book, their comments on the difference between previous applications and RC, their feelings and thoughts about the method and their advice about any changes to the application.

Semi-structured Teacher Interview Form: This was prepared in order to obtain teacher opinions about RC. Question statements in the Student Interview Form were re-arranged before included in the Teacher Interview Form.

Teaching Design

In the application, firstly, the teachers chose three books "Susi ve Paul'un Günlüğü", "Konuk Değil Baş Belası", and "Lolipop" written by Christine Nöstlinger. Each of the application classes contains 24 students. Since three books were selected, three groups, each containing eight students, were formed. Eight students were chosen because it was the first application and it allowed the students to control the process more comfortably. The groups

chose one of the six project types offered to them. The projects were suggested by the researchers because it was the first application. In this study, interrogator, mapper, word-hunter, plotter, connector, summarizer, analyzer, and observer roles were defined. Since it was the first study, books were divided into seven sections by the teachers. Accordingly, seven meetings were conducted. The time of the meetings were decided by the teachers. Meetings lasted for 30-40 minutes as the number of students in the groups was high. Book reading was conducted at home because of the lack of time at school.

Application Process

In the application process, firstly, the researchers gave information to the teachers about the method. Then, the teachers decided on the books to be read by students and introduced the method to their own classes a week before the application. The reading comprehension scale was administered three days before the application.

The first meeting of the application was conducted in the first week of the March in the Spring Semester of the 2009-2010 academic year. In this meeting, the teacher introduced the books and formed the groups. The tasks were distributed to groups and the students selected their projects. After the first meeting, the groups made seven meetings on two meetings/weekly basis. After the meetings came to an end, the groups presented their projects to the class. The project presentations were made in a day. The book reading and presentation lasted for a total of five weeks.

One week later, following the end of group work, a reading comprehension test was administered again. In the same week, the researchers conducted a focus group interview with three teachers. Moreover, the researchers conducted three separate focus group interviews with three students from each class. The students were selected from the groups by classroom teachers. All interviews were tape-recorded.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through reading comprehension scale were analyzed with SPSS software. According to the scores at the end of pre-application of this test, students were divided into three groups in terms of their level of reading comprehension skills. The responses to the scale were graded be-

tween 0 and 100. Students taking scores between 25 and 50 were regarded as the low group, students taking scores between 51 and 75 were regarded as the medium group, and students taking scores between 76 and 100 were regarded as the high group. Variations in the pre-test and post-test scores of the groups were analyzed via t test.

The data obtained via the teacher and students' interviews were analyzed by means of a structured reporting technique. This technique was selected because it allows irrelevant parts from data to be removed and provides a researcher with an opportunity to present the obtained data as she/he wishes as long as it is logical (Bassey, 1999).

Results

The Effect of Reading Circle on Reading Comprehension

The average of the scores obtained from the pre-application of reading comprehension scale was 66.1 while the average of the scores obtained from the post-application of reading comprehension scale was 73.2. Both the pretest and posttest results are similar on the basis of the classes. On average an eight point increase occurred in post-test scores both generally and on the basis of the classes. These differences are significant except for section C of the reading comprehension scale ($p < 0.05$).

The pre-test score averages of students with low, medium and high reading comprehension levels were respectively 44.3, 66.0, and 84.7. Their post-test score averages were 65.0, 72.9, and 80.3 respectively. An increase occurred in the post-test scores of each of the three groups. The greatest increase occurred in the low group. The increase in the scores of the post-tests of students with low and medium reading comprehension levels is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) however, no difference was found in the high group ($p > 0.05$).

Benefits of Reading Circle

The findings concerning the second research question were collated under the following four headings.

Comprehending the Book: According to the findings obtained from student opinions, students understood the books they read very well. Students attribute this finding to the fact that they read the book meticulously by internalizing it, they discussed even the smallest details, misunderstand-

ings were corrected and they asked their friends when they did not understand anything.

Learning and Permanence: According to the opinions of the teachers and students, through the RC method the students learnt the book they read better than when students read the book individually. Two students even stated that they could remember the whole book. Students attribute this finding to the fact that they read over a longer period of time, they undertook group discussions, they read and discussed even the smallest details and finally they corrected the mistakes of their peers. One of the teachers commented that they thought the acquisitions from books read in this way would be permanent.

Reading Habit: RC became useful in terms of encouraging positive reading habits, too. Two of the students said that they liked reading a book for the first time. Furthermore, students were taking and reading books of other groups, demanding to read books in this way, wanting to read the books just like in RC method and stating that they enjoyed reading the book in the application. One of the teachers mentioned that RC guaranteed that students would continue reading books.

Social Interaction: A student starting school in the year that the study was conducted stated that he/she found an opportunity to get to know his/her classmates due to the group formation.

Attitude towards the Reading Circle

According to the opinions of the teachers and students, the students found the RC method very enjoyable and fun. The best-liked aspects of the method were discussing with friends, the length of the time given to reading the book, conducting different tasks, and solidarity and cooperation among students. Teachers also thought that students liked this method very much and they enjoyed themselves in this process.

Group Projects

In the findings related to the fourth research question the students mostly preferred the power-point presentation project. However, there were also groups preparing drama, class panel, and picture book projects. One of the teachers and his students compared the themes and characters of the books in addition to the presentations.

Students liked the presentations of their peers and

stated that they understood other books, too due to these presentations. One of the students even stated that he/she understood the book as if he/she himself had read it. The teachers also liked the students presentations and commented that the students worked in a detailed, meticulous, and serious way.

Evaluation

For the fifth research question an evaluation was undertaken in two dimensions in the research process: firstly, peer evaluation and secondly, project evaluation. An observer role was defined for the peer evaluation and the student taking on this task evaluated the preparation and discussion on this day. The projects were evaluated by the teachers. The students were not disturbed by this evaluation process. They even considered it necessary to maintain order and produce a good product. The teachers reviewed the forms and made required arrangements when necessary.

Conclusion

Reading comprehension is finding the meaning of the text read, thinking about it and making inferences (Güneş, 2004). RC facilitates students thinking about the theme by means of tasks and discussion and allows them to reach their own conclusions by carrying out evaluations. In this study, the improved reading comprehension skills of students after the application of RC were parallel to the results of similar studies (Mizerka, 1999; Blum et al., 2002) ($p < 0.05$). This improvement is more among low-skilled students ($p < 0.05$ therefore, it appears that students with low reading comprehension skills benefited more from the RC method.

As a result of the RC application, students easily understood the book they had read. The students attributed this finding to the fact that they read the book meticulously by internalizing it, they discussed even the smallest details with their peers, misunderstandings were corrected, and they asked their peers when they did not understand anything. Since each page of the book is read in a detailed way, the ideas presented in each page and every point is discussed in RC, therefore, students' comprehension of the book is better. However, in individual reading, the student reads a page and passes on, often not understanding all or part of the content. Improved comprehension is achieved in RC because the main points such as characters,

personalities of them, the space where the events take place, time of the events and unknown words are handled in a detailed way. Although the students may not understand a part of the text, they have opportunity to learn it from others who have understood that part.

Looking at the opinions of the teachers and students, it is understood that students' acquisitions about the book are quite permanent. Two students even stated that they completely remembered the book although it had been two weeks since the application had been conducted. This is the summit of permanence and the main goal of teaching activities is the permanence of the information learnt. According to the cone of experience Lord (2007) commented when an individual reading is conducted, just 6-10% of the information in the book is remembered a couple of weeks later. RC is also collaborative learning. Lord (2007) posited that a permanence of 60-80% of the information can be achieved through collaborative learning and 80-98 % when a learner teaches another person. In RC, students conveyed their acquisitions about the book to their friends through discussions and projects. The high level of permanence in the application may be due to the fact that students teach and help one another through the discussions and projects.

Lack of positive reading habits is one of the main problems in Turkey. Although there is no definite percentage related to the problem, general opinion and the results of observation imply it. One of the most important benefits of RC to students is encouraging them to adopt positive reading habits (Burda, 2000; Chiang & Huang, 2005). Two of the students mentioned that they found reading a book enjoyable for the first time in their lives. One of the teachers mentioned that RC guaranteed that students would continue reading books.

In parallel with findings of this research, there are many studies proving that RC endears students to reading books (Culli, 2002; Olsen, 2007; Pitton, 2005; Rutherford et al., 2009).

RC is a combination of individual reading and collaborative teaching. Therefore, it is also possible to see the results of collaborative teaching in this study. Among the benefits of collaborative teaching is the increase of social interaction between the students (Avcı & Fer, 2004). Although the students were not asked any question related to the social interaction in focus group interviews, a student starting this school in the year when the study was conducted stated that his/her communication with

the students in the class had increased thanks to this method. Alwood (2000) also demonstrated that RC increases social interaction.

RC provided students with the opportunity to undertake many activities which they like such as choosing the book they want, reading at their own speeds, conducting tasks, engaging in group discussions, and working on a project (Daniels, 2002). Many approaches such as active learning (Açıkgöz, 2008), multiple intelligence (Nichelson-Nelson, 1998), quantum learning (Demirel, 2005) and brain based learning (Caine & Caine, 2002) stress the importance of enjoying oneself while learning and suggest that the learning environment is designed in accordance with this idea. Reviewing the opinions of the teachers and students, it was understood that they found RC method very enjoyable and fun. The best-liked aspects of the method were discussing with friends, the length of the time they had to read, conducting different tasks, the solidarity, and cooperation among the students. Teachers also thought that students very much liked this method and they enjoyed themselves in this process. In conclusion, it can be said that the method allows students to enjoy themselves while learning and makes learning more enjoyable.

Projects are frequently used in teaching. The main goals of a project are to apply the information learnt to real life situations and ensure permanent learning (Erdem, 2005). In addition to the above mentioned goals, the project used in RC also aims to facilitate the sharing of the books read with other students. Students liked the presentations of their peers and stated that they were also able to understand the other books that other students had read due to these presentations. One of the students even stated that he/she understood a book read by a peer as if he/she had read it. Teachers also liked the presentations of students. One of the teachers stated that students generated products that were more beautiful than his/her expectations.

In RC, authentic assessment techniques are employed. In this study, it was peer and project evaluation. The observer role was defined for peer evaluation and the student taking on this task evaluated the preparation and discussion on the day. The projects were evaluated by the teachers. The students were not disturbed by the evaluation. They even considered it necessary to maintain order and generate a good product.

In conclusion, it can be said that RC is effective in primary education fourth grade students acquiring reading comprehension skills and adopting a

reading habit. In addition, this method increases the permanence of what has been learnt. While assisting in these acquisitions, it offers an enjoyable process to the students. Book projects offer an effective way for sharing of books with others and their understanding of the books. Further studies could examine the employability of RC at different grade levels. Moreover, studies can be conducted to compare individual reading programs and RC in terms of different variables.

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