

LITERATURE CIRCLES IN EFL CURRICULA: ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating literature circles in EFL curricula provides practical teaching-learning strategies that work for secondary schools as well as colleges or universities. This paper presents a three-step framework- pre-reading, discussion, and project and evaluation- for teachers to design literature-related activities as well as help foreign language students achieve a true personal encounter with texts, and interpret, appreciate, and gain satisfaction from them. The paper concludes with a discussion on some teaching strategies that encourage the use of learners' prior experience and cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

EFL students who learn English as a major study subject are often unfamiliar with critical ways of reading, questioning and analyzing texts. They are not encouraged to learn about the world at large since the traditional education system places the highest premium on memorizing linguistic aspects of English. They are used to responding to the receptive skills in the English language such as listening and reading and do well in written skills tests, which mostly focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. However, with the global shift in the role of English, English education in EFL situations has been experiencing new phases with the recognition of the importance of communicative language teaching and the cultural orientation of the target language.

Literature circles where students read and talk about literature can meet new challenges in EFL teaching since EFL learners will have the following benefits. First, students learn about the various uses of English and will eventually be able to use it by themselves by grasping the characteristics of literary language. By reading aloud, discussing and responding to the text, students have more opportunities to practice the target language in a practical sense. According to Marquardt (1968), the study of literature in the target language is the best approach to a total mastery of the language. Second, literature models a wide range of communicative strategies. Through diverse scenes from literature, students encounter various communicative techniques and strategies. Third, students can overcome many cultural barriers by studying literature and they become more responsive to other cultures while improving their communication across cultures since "literature is a link towards that culture which sustains the expression of any language" (Povey, 1979). Lastly, students have an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their life since literature provides readers with a living experience in the process of transacting with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995) and is thought of as a special resource for personal development and growth (Carter & Long, 1991).

This paper proposes incorporating literature circles in EFL curricula by introducing the framework of literature circles for EFL settings. It also provides practical strategies for literature circles by referring to three books that work for secondary schools as well as colleges or universities.

Theoretical Background

Literature circles are defined as “discussion groups in which children meet regularly to talk about books” (Owens, 1995, p. 2). They are widely adopted in Language Arts curricula encouraging children who speak English as their mother tongue to extend their experience through reading and discussing books. These circles adopt a theory of reader response which takes into account the students’ personal response to a text (Iser, 1978), and allows literature to be relevant to the students’ life. By adopting a reader response approach in a classroom, multiple interpretations can be accepted rather than just one “correct” interpretation by a teacher. Instead of one interpretation, the ultimate goal in a reader response approach is to achieve a mature response, which originates from the process of reading. The reader response approach does not have a fixed critical stance towards literature, but views the process as a transaction between the reader and the text in which the reader interacts with the perspectives of the text, and the meaning is determined as the result of the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Since the reader response approach is to provide a genuine engagement between the text and the students, students will achieve satisfaction from their reading experience. Therefore, reader-oriented theories have been adopted by many classroom teachers in search of a way to conceptualize literature instruction that would parallel the learner-centered approach to writing instruction (Faust, 2001). In the ESL classroom, this view allows room for not only creativity and reflective thinking, but also for promotion of language skills. Therefore, literature sessions that adopt the reader response approach can promote the appreciation of literature and facilitate language learning at the same time.

Framework of Literature Circles

When literature circles are introduced in EFL classrooms, these circles hold special promise. Reading is no longer a subject which consists of vocabulary-controlled snippets of grammar-translation since they are based on the belief that reading is a transactional process.

When incorporating literature circles in EFL curricula, however, teaching and learning English through literature should be considered as the primary purpose of EFL classrooms. In planning literature circles in EFL classrooms, therefore, a framework which consists of three steps— pre-reading, discussion, and project and evaluation— is proposed. In each step, the teacher focuses on how activities help students learn a foreign language, achieve a true personal encounter with the texts, and interpret, appreciate, and gain satisfaction from them.

Step 1: Pre-reading

The session focuses on linguistic aspects of the text and preparation for the next step, literature discussions.

- i. Students take the story home to read with a recommended vocabulary list.
- ii. Students study the vocabulary, which might be unfamiliar to them and contains cultural meaning. (For example, a more detailed description of the word *reservation* with its cultural connotation, political issues and system, facilitates and extends the understanding of the context and enriches language use in appropriate situations).
- iii. Students also study major points which can be useful in improving their language skills.
- iv. Students are encouraged to read aloud the story while they are reading at home.
- v. After reading aloud the assigned part, students write down their initial response in their journal.

Step 2: Literature Discussions

This session occurs in the classroom and is divided into two different group discussions: small group discussion and the whole class discussion. After small group discussions, the whole class discussion takes place.

- Small group discussion
 - i. Before discussion, students read aloud part of the assigned reading (their own choice) to each member of their group and talk about the reason for their selection.
 - ii. Students talk about their initial responses to commence discussion, and select one or two topics for whole class discussion.
 - iii. Students further discuss the selected topics and develop them into topics for the whole class to discuss.
- The whole class discussion
 - i. Each group presents its completed task to the rest of the class.
 - ii. The rest of the class participates in the discussion.
 - iii. After class discussion, students respond in their journal.

Step 3: Project and evaluation

The session starts with the project and is completed with the students' evaluation.

- Project
 - i. Presentation of projects by each group.
 - ii. A full-scale written response at the end of each group's project.
- Evaluation
 - i. Students discuss projects in relation to the story and conduct self and/or peer evaluation.
 - ii. Each student writes his/her final response to the story.

Teaching Strategies

In order to read books, EFL students need to improve their language skills, to enhance comprehension of the text, to construct meaning from it, and to develop their communicative ability. Since students' comprehension of the literature is largely dependent upon students' knowledge of the world, students are also encouraged to use their prior experience including their cultural background. The following strategies, therefore, are adopted to maximize the aim of EFL classes.

1. Reading Aloud

Students are encouraged to read aloud at home and during small group discussion. In EFL contexts, reading aloud forms an integral part of the language education programmed for the following reasons. First, reading aloud provides a pleasurable experience. By reading aloud, students not only acquire language production skills or speaking but also gain confidence in speaking in front of others. Second, reading aloud bonds the reader and listener. Students share an experience by reading aloud to the members of their group. Especially, reading the conversational parts extends their relation to actors and audiences. Third, reading aloud enhances overall language acquisition. Actually, students practice three language skills at the same time by just reading aloud. While they are reading, they speak and listen to what they read. In addition, reading aloud is very helpful for students to think and write more systematically and therefore, reading aloud improves the writing skill, too.

Hence, reading aloud is no longer for pre-schooners and pre-readers only. In the language learning environment, reading aloud is a very important tool to improve all four language skills. Especially in EFL settings where the target language is not the common language in the environment, extended hours of reading for its own sake and reading aloud are recommended.

2. Literature Discussion Groups

Literature discussions in the classroom are made up of two different discussion groups: small discussion groups and the whole class. For classroom discussions, students participate in small group discussions and then the whole class joins the class discussion. Usually, each small group includes four to six participants. During the small group activity, the teacher visits each group one by one for a short period of time and assists or observes the discussion depending on the situation. If the discussion does not flow smoothly, the teacher actively works with the group by suggesting ideas and providing discussion questions or models the type of response she is looking for.

At the start of small group discussions, students are encouraged to read-aloud their favorite parts to share. Then, students recall the contents of their journal entry and actively engage in talk about significant events and characters of the story. When students come to a confusing passage, first they will read and talk together in their group. When they cannot solve the problem through group work, they come to the teacher for her advice. The group raises one or two issues for the class discussion.

After group discussion, the whole class gathers for the class discussion with the issues raised by each group. First, each group will present the issues to the class. In the class discussion, the teacher acts more like a facilitator rather than as an observer since the teacher also shares her response with the class. With a big group such as the whole class, the teacher should be careful in making sure that everyone gets his/her fair opportunity to talk and that a few students do not dominate the floor.

3. Journal Writing

Journal writing in the EFL classroom is a way for students to respond to literature, express their thoughts, and improve language learning. In a language class, teachers should tell the students “how and what” to write. The teacher can guide students on how they get the ideas and what to write for their journals while they are reading the text: write about their favorite characters, ask questions about them, and connect the experience of characters with their own and others. For many EFL students, however, learning how to write or start their journal is a more significant issue than what to write because of their limited language ability. In this case, students can begin their journals using journal prompts or starters provided (Clausen, 1995)¹.

Written reflections of personal response takes place at three different times:

1) the initial jotting while students read at home, 2) sharing responses from literature discussions, and 3) a full-scale written response at the end of each group’s project. Writing allows students to reflect on and internalize the meaning they have gathered from the story at different moments. *The Music of Dolphins* in which the story is developed through journals written by Mila, the main character, can model students’ journal writing.

Dialogue journal writing is another way of responding to the text in language classrooms. It has been employed to carry out written conversations between a student and the teacher (Staton, Shuy, Peyton, & Reed, 1988). For the dialogue journal, a student and the teacher share a notebook in which they write back and forth to each other in the form of letters.

Responding to the students’ journal also is crucial since the teacher’s feedback may become an input into the next journal entry and can create a cycle of writing and responses (Todd, Mills, Palard & Khamcharoen, 2001). The teacher collects the students’ journals after each discussion and writes comments and asks questions to extend their thinking. The teacher gives feedback to students by responding to them. A short comment from the teacher can unearth the students’ hidden talent, provide amusement to appreciate literature, and encourage them to improve their language skills. In the case of adopting dialogue journal writing, the teacher can provide his/her response as a reply to each student’s letter.

4. Problem Posing/Solving Questions

Freire's (1970) concept of problem-posing/problem-solving questions has been used in language classrooms. Freire's questions were useful in helping language learners to improve not only language abilities, but also analytic thinking skills, since they underlie democratic dialogue, the participatory teaching format and critical literacy. By using a Freirean process, teachers can identify key steps in language teaching/learning such as discovering students' generative themes, how to bring the issues into the classroom for discussion and the procedures for the discussion. For example, the classroom teacher can bring four questions – "What is the problem?" "Why is this a problem?" "What causes the problem?" and "What can we do about the problem?" – and ask them to get answers for each question. Then students talk about what they wrote through literature discussions.

A study carried out by teachers at a local level shows that problem solving can be a first step in making an EFL curriculum more responsive to student interests and needs (Schlepppegrell and Bowman, 1995). The study proved that problem-solving questions served as a good method to teach a foreign language especially in resource-poor educational environments such as African secondary schools.

In using problem posing/solving questions in EFL classrooms, the teacher should consider students' level of English and assign a manageable length of text for the questions and answers. For example, when I introduced *Superfudge* by Judy Blume to 7th graders, I asked students to deal with one chapter for each circle. With chapter 2 of *Superfudge*, twelve students from one class who worked individually brought eight different problems and solutions, and enriched the dialogue when they talked about what they wrote.

5. Project

Projects that involve recreations of part of the text make students more aware of themselves as writers. As a consequence of this awareness, students become more sensitive readers; they become meaningfully engaged in the process of creative and critical thinking. Understanding is never complete until one can actually experience or tries to imagine what it is like being one of the characters or the authors. Setting a project for a group task, students engage in a collaborative social setting, which does not threaten the students' confidence.

The performing arts introduced by Norwick (1995), are good examples not only for a reading program, but also for EFL classes. The order of the performing arts - mime, story theatre, choral reading, readers' theatre, improvisation, and music and movement - is a good procedure in which students can build new skills on the basis of the previous skills. In language classes, involving students in dramatic responses after they have finished reading and discussing, affords them opportunities to further extend not only the appreciation of literature, but also improve language usage. Students do not need to employ all the art forms, but can select any of them considering the appropriateness of the scene and their language ability.

For EFL students, producing a foreign language by speaking and writing is more difficult than receiving skills such as listening and reading. Therefore, mime is a safe place to start for the students to just express what they received in movement without verbal response. Students can start with one important scene from the story and add movements. The next step of performing arts is story theatre,

which includes action, but not too much dialogue. Students from each group provide the narration by reading aloud directly from the text as the others mime the actions of the characters.

Choral reading built on the students' skill at mime and story theatre demonstrates the following choral arrangements: unison, line-at-a-time, refrain, and antiphony. Through this process, students learn to rehearse, experiment with the sounds of language, and take pride in their accomplishments. Lines from *The People Shall Continue* are good examples of choral reading since the language used by the text is simple, rhyming, and repetitive.

In readers' theatre or role playing, dialogue is part of the action, and characters strongly interact with each other. In this form of dramatic response, students read from a written script but don't memorize their lines, use props or costumes, or add movement. Since students read the dialogue as if they were the characters, readers' theatre provides a safe way to take on the role of characters without taking a risk of making mistakes or losing face in front of the class. The class can use dialogues contained in the text, or the classroom teacher or students can write scripts for readers' theatre from the story.

Unlike readers' theatre, improvisation is drama without a script. In other words, the dialogue is ad-libbed and students do not have to memorize or repeat the script. Instead, they can interpret the characters more personally than when they follow the script. Music and movement is the last stage of the performing arts in which the narration is dropped and music is added. By adding or creating music for the scene, students can enjoy the rhythm of a different language and the mood of the story.

6. Evaluation

By presenting what they have read in a most appropriate format for them, students can deepen the quality of their responses, increase their confidence in their choice and nourish powerful feelings of sharing and exchanging their ideas with the class. Evaluation after presentation consolidates students' visual or audio images by reconsidering them. Each group's presentation is video-taped and after presentation, students view a video tape of their presentations. Evaluation is conducted in two ways by completing two evaluation forms prepared by the teacher: an evaluation form of other group presentations and self-evaluation form. Self/peer group-evaluation is another good way of appreciating their own and other group responses and the sparkling moment of discussion and presentation.

Incorporating Literature Circles

For literature to be best used in EFL contexts, teachers should consider the selection of the most appropriate texts for students. Especially, the literature in EFL classrooms must reflect students' interests, social/cultural values of the story, students' level of language and so on. Au and Raphael (2000) suggest that both age- and reading-level-appropriateness should be considered in text selection. Sage (1987) suggests five points which he believes is the best usage of literature in the curriculum: 1) appreciation and enjoyment of literature; 2) the refinement of language skills; 3) the stimulation of more advanced learning; 4) a stimulus for advanced discussion; and 5) personal growth.

Considering the suggestions above, five books that can be used in integrating literature circles into secondary or tertiary EFL curricula are introduced. Strategies and literature responses provided are from

my previous study (Kim, 2002) or by undergoing experiments with diverse levels of EFL students in terms of ages and English language abilities.

1. Cultural Experience: *The People Shall Continue*

Language teachers recognize that picture books are not just for young children, and an easy picture book, *The People Shall Continue* by Simon Ortiz, provides a comfortable atmosphere for EFL students as the starting point of literature circles. The author describes the life and survival of people with the formation of early American history in easy and repeated pattern, and shows conflicts between two different cultural groups - Native American and European American. Students can talk about two different cultures and compare their own culture and life with those of the characters in the text.

The book also is very helpful for ESL students to capture meaning, to practice expressions, and to read aloud the story because of repeated patterns, predictable stories, and rhymes. For instance, repeated patterns such as “Those who...,” “The people from ...,” “At times...,” and others are good practice for students’ self study and it also helps students to apply these pattern in their conversation².

2. Integrated Learning: *Fly Away Home*

Eve Bunting presents a difficult subject, homelessness, in picture book format. A boy in *Fly Away Home* narrates the facts of his homeless life with his father after losing his mother. With the picture book, *Fly Away Home*, language learners can have opportunities to improve four English skills. The teacher can integrate activities such as videotape watching³, the reading of the text, journal writing, and group and whole class discussions. These diverse activities integrate different language process skills so that students can improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills of English. For example, while watching the video version of *Fly Away Home*, students focus on listening to the story. Then, students discuss the story constructing the meaning of the story which leads to improvement of the English speaking skill. After outlining the story, the teacher provides the script of the text and students read the text to fill the gap. They again respond to the text by writing journals which will enhance their writing skill.

The teacher can help students to think about the story more from the point of view of the homeless by providing writing incentives such as “What do you think?” “What did you notice?” “What did you learn?” and “What did you feel?” While answering these questions in their journals, students can improve their writing skills.

In my experience of reading and talking about *Fly Away Home* with 7th and 8th grade students, I found that EFL adolescents liked picture books as long as they learned English and extended their experiences. One of 8th graders recommended *Fly Away Home* since the book was easy to read, but was not childish, and provided her with “something to think about.”

3. Learning through Acting: *Superfudge*

Superfudge by Judy Blume is helpful to young EFL students who would like to learn English through context since this book shows a six grader, Peter, and his life at home and school. While reading *Superfudge*, students can compare their school and family lives with those of Peter, the main character: some students might express their relief at not having a little brother like Peter’s and another student might identify him/herself with the main character.

In terms of language learning, *Superfudge* is good material for oral practice since the book contains lots of dialogue. Students enjoy acting by selecting their favorite parts and by playing the characters they want to play. The activity is also helpful for the students to work collaboratively in a small group. For example, they start the activity by separating each other's parts from the selected part. At first, students are just reading their parts and then the teacher encourages them to think about the situation and the atmosphere from the scene and to put themselves in the character's situation. Little by little, students create characters rather than just practice a set dialogue from the text. Gradually they develop readers' theatre into improvisation and are fully engaged in the world of text. After readers' theatre or improvisation, students can have an opportunity to conduct self and/or peer evaluations.

4. Sharing Learning Experience: *The Music of Dolphins*

The Music of Dolphins by Karen Hesse begins with the speech development of a dolphin girl, Mila, who is rescued from an unpopulated island off the coast of Florida and evolves into something very different: her realization of identity and longing for her ocean home. First, as language learners, EFL students are interested in the process and development of Mila's learning of English. EFL students are encouraged by Mila's attempts to express herself with her somewhat underdeveloped language. Students also can recognize how her language changed with her progress in language itself and her realization of herself and the world around her.

Then students talk about Mila's endeavor to learn about human beings, to adjust in their world, her unconscious realization of herself as a dolphin, and eventually her longing for the other world. Whenever Mila meets her new world through diverse media such as the computer, radio, television and music, students talk about how she responds to them and how they influence and change her view of the world. Sometimes, students will agree with her, or they will suggest a better way of responding to her new experiences by writing a letter to her or the author in their journal. They also can write their own journal on learning a new language and culture as Mila did. Then each student can develop the activities into his/her project and present it to the whole class.

5. Bridging Two Worlds: "True Love"⁴

"True Love" is a short story about a computer programmer, Milton, and his personal computer, Joe. In this story, a young man who is looking for an ideal woman using one of the most popular modern science products attracts young adult EFL students in many respects. These days, computers are becoming more and more popular and closer to people, regardless of any specific culture or age group. In other words, the computer is not a part of one culture specifically, but universal. Students are very pleased to see that a person from another culture is also interested in the computer.

Therefore, when Milton programmes Joe to find him a woman who would be perfect for him, students identify with him and participate in story telling more actively. Or students criticize or defend Milton when he orders Joe to obey him. By adopting problem posing/solving questions, students can suggest problems with Milton, his relationship with Joe, and his search for a perfect woman.

Writing their own stories is a good opportunity to extend the imagination and improve the writing skill. Students can set up an interview scene with the women they searched for through a computer. With more refined language and a current theme, the story stimulates the students' language skills and

advanced discussion. Students, therefore, plan a project that employs, higher skills of language and use such as readers theatre and improvisation.

Conclusion

A language class, which adopts the reader response approach, is a learner-centered one since the approach emphasizes the growth of the individual reader as an active and reflective maker of meaning. If literature in the EFL classroom is taught in a response-based manner, it is not just a vehicle for language teaching, but a form of aesthetic enlightenment. Students can be more creative and critical in their thinking since in a literature session, there are no right or wrong answers or competition for the best interpretation. Therefore, students enhance further the experience of learning a foreign language.

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- 1 Journal Prompts (I think..., I feel..., I wonder..., I wish..., If I were..., That reminds me of..., I noticed)
- 2 1. those who ...
 Their leaders were those who served the people.
 Their healers were those who cared for the people.
 Their hunters were those who provided for the people.
 Their warriors were those who protected the people.
 2. The people from ...
 The people from the North brought elk meat.
 The people from the West gave them fish.
 The people from the South brought corn.
 The people from the East gave them hides.
 3. At times...
 At times, corn did not grow and there was famine.
 At times, winters were very cold and there was hardship.
 At times, the winds blew hot and rivers dried.
 At times, the people grew uneasy among themselves.
- 3 *Fly Away Home* [video recording] / Great Plains National Instructional Television Library and WNED-TV. Series. (*Reading Rainbow* hosted by LeVar Burton produces video version of *Fly Away Home* based on a book of the same title by Eve Bunting.
- 4 A short story from *The Asimov Chronicles* (1991) edited by Martin H. Greenberg.