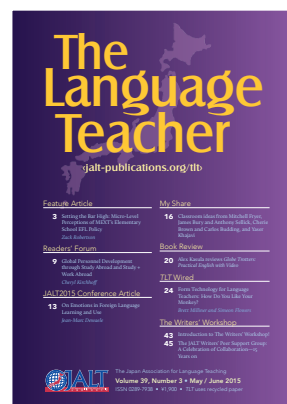


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# EFL Literature Circles: Collaboratively Acquiring Language and Meaning

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Literature circles have many advantages for acquiring a foreign language, particularly due to their collaborative nature. Students work together, and increase cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, reading comprehension abilities, and inference skills. Additionally, they search for meaning, examine text, and increase their vocabulary and idiom awareness by seeing those respective items in context. Their collaborative nature can bring a classroom of students together with the teacher as facilitator. For the structure of literature circles to work, each student is assigned a role. These may include Discussion Leader, Real-Life Connector, Passage Person, Summarizer, Graphic Organizer, The If Person, Character Creator, among others. Each of these roles will be addressed, and what is expected of each literature circle member. With each role, they challenge the group members to discuss and examine the text more fully, and therefore collaboratively learn together. This method closely follows Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) model.

Literature Circles (LC) は、特に協働的なので、外国語の習得に役立つ多くの利点がある。学生達はLC内で一緒に取り組むことで文化的意識、批判的思考技能、読解力や推理力を高める。さらに、意味を検索し、本文を調べ、文脈の中で各項目を見て語彙・熟語の理解を深める。LCの協働的特質によって教師は教室の進行役的存在となり、学生は各自の役割を与えられる。例えば、ディスカッションを主導する者、実生活との連結者、読解する段落を決める者、要約する者、関連画像を探る者、仮定の提案をする者、登場人物を創案する者、などである。このように役割をLCグループ内で割り当てることで協力的な学習ができて、本文について徹底的に討論し検証することができる。これは、VygotskyのZPD（最近接発達領域）とも強く関連している。

## A Case for Collaboratively Studying Literature

Many second language acquisition leaders in the field promote reading novels. Day and Banford (1998) are strong supporters of extensive reading programs, where students regularly expose themselves to various authors and novels. However, working together, students collaboratively fill in the gaps of knowledge and awareness for all aspects of reading comprehension, vocabulary awareness, idiom usage, and other skills that are directly connected to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The idea is that students can collectively work out meanings that may be diffi-

cult to make sense of on their own. Additionally, the teacher as the native or near-native speaker can assist in comprehending difficult aspects of both the language and culture within the reading.

Studying literature collectively creates specific strengths such as increasing critical thinking skills, enhancing awareness of the target language through culture, and improving the collaborative nature of studying language together among participants. Krashen's (2003) Comprehension Hypothesis discusses how we acquire language and develop literacy through the process of understanding what we hear and what we read. Increasing reading comprehension assists in acquiring language.

Another value of literature books is that students must read significantly more than traditional shorter readings, which students may be in the habit of using direct translation methods to understand. Iida (2013) found that most university faculties in Japan use the grammar-translation method as their preferred way to teach English over actual communication. Studying literature through literature circles will get students to collaborate and communicate more, as well as allow them to read for deeper meaning. Additionally, Bibby (2012) sees the role of literature as a model to teach the target language's sociocultural features and cultural nuisances. Lastly, Clafin (2012) adds that literature is full of descriptive text and wordplay, very specific to the language and its culture. Additionally, if material is studied together with a teacher, then the teacher can bridge the gaps in regards to social issues and the usage of colloquial English or idiomatic phrases.

## Applying Literature Circles with EFL Language Students

Furr (2004) described how uninterested and unmotivated students, once exposed to using literature circles (LCs) in the classroom, became eager to share stories, point at passages to support their arguments, and ask questions of each other. Bibby (2012) addresses how a LC allows students to interact more with the text, promotes their L2 competence, and increases their ability to critically evaluate the text.

## The value of student collaboration

Hisatsune (2012) mentions that teachers are consistently looking for activities that increase student's confidence and skills, so students become more autonomous and capable learners since LCs are student-led. As students take control of their own learning, they choose what interests them most as they focus on their roles.

Additionally, according to Daniels and Steineke (2004) this student-led interaction also deepens friendships, collaboration, and builds a better classroom community. Within the LC, each member has a unique overall task, and they collectively guide the content, the direction, the complexity of the lexicon, and go at their own pace (Williams, 2010). In this way, students experience incidental learning and self-directed noticing through meaningful input from the authentic text (Shelton-Strong, 2012).

This student collaboration increases awareness on many levels. Bibby (2012) states how as students interact with the literature, they involve themselves in extended discussion on the issues presented in the reading. Brown's (2009) research confirms this, as he comments on how students change their opinions on various topics through discussing the novel. As they share, argue, and point out text, they examine issues and may come to differing and more complex opinions.

This collaboration connects well even on scientific levels. Maher (2013a) researched the connection of second language acquisition with neuroplasticity. The more students interact and use the target language through discussion, the brain's synapses for language acquisition become stronger. This also connects with a prior study by Maher (2012) in which it is suggested that working with various partners and in pair work, language input, and therefore their language acquisition abilities are increased. Students working together and gaining ideas from multiple partners enhance their learning.

## Critical Thinking Skills Enhanced

Kim (2003) discusses how many EFL students, particularly in Asia, come from a traditional educational system that stresses memorizing linguistic aspects of English, as opposed to learning how to question and analyze texts. Chiang and Huang (2005) are convinced that this is one of the greatest challenges to teaching students how to think critically. Brown (2009) states how LCs ensure EFL students analyze the text, that they must connect the reading to the real world, and they must challenge

their cultural assumptions. In this way, students can simultaneously enhance both their English and their critical thinking skills.

While students interact with the literary text, it increases their L2 competence and allows them to critically evaluate it (Bibby, 2012). Teachers can also have a role questioning various aspects of the assigned reading, and suggest to students they view the text in different ways. Brown (2009) observes that as students discuss the reading, they examine emotional conflicts and social dilemmas, which ultimately demand a response from the students or a value judgment.

## The Literature Circle Cycle

Each LC group should have about five members, and will remain a group for five sessions. One session generally and ideally equates to once a week. Students are given rolework, (i.e., homework to prepare for their role), prior to each LC session. Five members, with five sessions, and five roles, means that one cycle will be complete when every member has experienced every role. My own personal preference is then to change some of the roles and change the group members for the next cycle, just so students can hear different class member's ideas throughout the semester. Only five roles, maximum, should be given each cycle.

For time-management purposes, each session will be set an amount of time that must be adhered to. Usually, the first session may only be twenty minutes, so that students can get a feel for how they operate. Later, the teacher might extend it up to 40-45 minutes, once students get into the tasks. In my observation, near the end of the novel, when the content becomes more predictable, I usually reduce the required time back down to 25-30 minutes again.

## Student Rolework

Prior to each LC session, students focus on specific tasks (rolework), related to a role they will adhere to. Their rolework is then brought into their LC group, and another copy given to the teacher for assessment. I've found the best way to assess their role work is by having minimum requirements and grade them comparative to other students who submit the same role for that session. Daniels (2002), Furr (2011), and Maher (2013b, 2014a, 2014b) all discuss possible student roles, and a combination of these and other unique ones will be discussed in Table 1.

Table 1. Student Roles in the Literature Circle

Title	Role	Rolework to submit
Discussion Leader (DL)	Responsible for generating discussion and time management. If their group finishes early, the DL is held responsible for failing to involve the members properly, or to have created enough questions to generate discussion.	10 interesting, thought-provoking, discussion-generating questions.
Passage Person	This person will highlight passage paragraphs to discuss. Ideally, passages that are unclear, and require a need to further examine and study collectively. Of particular note are passages that seem important to the overall understanding of the story.	Choose at least three passages in the text, and highlight why you chose them. For example, you thought they were unclear, important, critical to understanding the story, etc.)
Visualizer	This person will collect a number of images from the internet; but if the student is more creative, they could draw the images as well. Particularly important images would include cultural items, or photos of products or people found within that culture.	Submit 10 images from the internet. Ideally they should be words/items that are culturally different, and seeing a picture would be helpful to the group.
Graphic Organizer	This role can either draw or collect images from the internet, but they must organize events sequentially with arrows and other diagrams. This person has more of a visual summary type of role.	Submit their graphically organized material.
Culture Connector	This role records anything in the story that is culturally different or unique that might be of interest to the other members. In can include elements from subcultures, past time periods, or foreign cultures.	Submit three uniquely and thought-provoking cultural differences between the readers' world and the story. Preferably not the obvious such as <i>they celebrate Christmas</i> .
Vocabulary Wizard	Choose ten words they find that are new and worthwhile to study in order to understand more of the story.	A vocabulary quiz. This role involves creating a vocabulary quiz with matching answers, to test their members.
Real Life Connector	This role connects events in the story with personal real life events or heresay. Then they ask group members if they have had similar experiences. For example, a character has an interaction with a police officer. This person connects his own experience with a police officer, and then elicits other stories from other members.	Submit two personal real life connections with questions to elicit more discussion from other members.
Summarizer	Summarize the assigned text for that session.	Submit the summary.
The IF Master	Creating <i>what if</i> scenarios. For example, what if you were Jay Gatsby, if you were in his same situation regarding X, what would you do?	Submit two thought-provoking questions, such as, "What if you were X, what would you do in situation Z?" .

**Pre-Teach the Idiomatic Phrases**

One suggestion for teachers before they assign the next session's reading, is for them to read it beforehand and catch anything that might be difficult for the student to look up on their own. These include

idiomatic expressions, phrases, and colloquial English. If they can study it a week before, and take a quiz on it, then when they later read the phrase in the actual story context, it will help them better understand the story overall. Additionally, recycling

any vocabulary is essential to acquiring new vocabulary (Nation, 2009). So, it would be suggested they should encounter these phrases several times.

## Conclusion

In summary, EFL LCs offer an excellent opportunity for students to collaboratively acquire language, cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, increased comprehension for larger reading passages, and overall story and language meaning. It is an opportunity to see and use words in their actual context, and have a similar-minded group with the same purposes, and a teacher facilitator to assist them in this understanding.

Additionally, students can bond and share the learning experience with other classmates that will last well beyond the scope of the class. Years later, they might see those same group members again, and readily ask each other, "What would Holden Caulfield do?"

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