

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Literature circles for critical thinking in global issues classes

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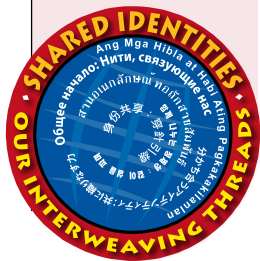
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In EFL classes around the world, critical thinking is becoming more of a central theme and it is a goal of many language programs. This is especially true in the popular field of global issues. A quick survey of any major publisher's catalogue will show a number of titles dedicated to developing English skills while learning about global issues. These books promote the idea of becoming a critical thinker, which is seen as both a goal and a necessary element of global issues courses. This paper examines the use of literature circles to help students develop critical thinking abilities by bringing literature into the global issues curriculum. Using literature in content based instruction classes can personalize remote issues and help make students more aware of their own attitudes. The process of analysis used in literature circles helps develop the analytical skills and self-evaluative stance needed to develop critical thinking.

EFLクラスにおける批判的思考(クリティカル・シンキング)能力の開発は、全世界的に、言語教育の最重要課題となりつつあり、言語プログラムの最終教育目標とされている場合も少なくない。学生の人気を集める国際問題クラスでは、この傾向が特に顕著に表れている。名の通った出版会社のカタログには、軽く目を通しただけでも、国際問題を学びながら英語力を身につけることに重点をおいた教材名がいくつも掲載されていることがわかる。こういった教材では、批判的思考能力の開発は、国際問題コースの最終教育目標であり、コースを受講するためには必要不可欠なスキルとされている。この研究報告では、国際問題クラスの教材に文学を取り入れ、学生の批判的思考能力開発に役立てるために読書サークルの活用方法を検証した。コンテンツベースド・インストラクションクラスに文学を取り入れることにより、学生は、自分とはまったく関係がないと思っていた国際問題をより身近な、自分自身の問題として考えるようになり、読書サークルでの問題分析は、批判的思考能力の開発に必要な分析力や問題に対する自分自身の考えを熟慮する姿勢を養うことに役立った。

In EFL classes around the world, critical thinking is becoming more of a central theme in language education and it is a stated goal of many language programs as well as an implicit goal of many others. This is especially true in the popular field of global issues. A quick survey of any major publisher's catalogue will show a number of titles dedicated to developing English skills while learning about global



issues. See for example Worcester (2006) and Stapleton (2007). Many of these titles promote the idea of becoming a critical thinker, which is often seen as both a goal and a necessary element of global issues courses (Anderson, 1996). Motegi and Johnson (2004), for example, say that “The primary target [of their text] is critical thinking—how to formulate opinions from many different angles” (p. iv). Literature circles can be a powerful tool to help students develop critical thinking abilities by bringing fiction into the global issues curriculum.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is not easy to define. Some see it as a set of skills including analysis, inference, interpretation, and self-regulation (Benesch, 1993). Others see these skills as part of analytical thinking and look at critical thinking as more of a stance than a skill. It is the inclination to see connections between one’s own life and society as a whole and the willingness to challenge the underlying assumptions and contexts of arguments, including one’s own (Pally, 2001). Still others add a third dimension of qualities of thought such as open-mindedness, truth-seeking, intellectual honesty, and good judgment (Sampedro & Hilliard, 2004).

Just as it is not easy to define, it may not be easy to teach critical thinking. There are indications that direct teaching of skills thought to be important in critical thinking does not result in transfer beyond the teaching situation. As Van Gelder (2005) says, teaching critical thinking by teaching about or showcasing examples of critical thinking skills is “about as effective as working on your tennis by watching Wimbledon” (p.3). Actual practice is needed. Unless the students are doing the thinking

themselves, they will not improve. So it may be that practicing the desired skills and nurturing the desired stance is more effective than direct explanation of a set of skills. Teachers need to create an environment which supports active critical thinking and give students class materials which demand it, rather than attempting to demonstrate what it is by way of example.

Literature circles

One technique teachers can use to promote and practice critical thinking is Literature Circles, which can be traced back to the work of Daniels (1994) who suggests setting up book discussion groups in elementary and secondary L1 reading classes. While the original model has been modified to suit many different situations, the common elements are as follows. Students are placed together in a small group to discuss a book that they have all been reading at the same pace. The group gets together on a regular basis (for example, after reading each chapter) to discuss sections of the work. The power of the method comes from the roles assigned to each group member. Everyone has a specific role to play in the discussion, and these roles require the students to approach the text from a different angle and look closely at specific aspects of the text. Each group member is given a different worksheet, which outlines their role, guides their reading and gives them a place for note-taking. As the group moves through the text, members change roles so that each member has a chance to become comfortable with each role.

In adapting literature circles to an extensive reading EFL context, Furr (2007) recommends six possible roles, which break up “what a mature reader does naturally” (p. 17) into manageable tasks for developing readers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Six possible roles for literature circles in EFL (adapted from Furr, 2007)

Role	Functions
Discussion Leader	Maintain flow of the discussion. Probe for details and opinions.
Summarizer	Retell the story. Focus the group's attention on key points of the plot.
Connector	Establish connections between the story or characters and the real world.
Word Master	Focus the group's attention on key words from the text. Look at meaning and use issues.
Passage Person	Ask for the group's help to interpret unclear passages from the text or focus attention on key passages.
Culture Collector	Note and explain comparisons between the culture(s) of the story and the group's home culture(s).

Several studies of similar role-based literature circles in EFL contexts have shown a variety of benefits to the approach. Kim (2004) showed that group members benefited from the extensive opportunities for real spoken output that literature circles provide. Hsu (2004) found that literature circles were a valuable tool in empowering students and encouraging independent learning. And Kim (2003) discussed the benefits of literature circles in terms of encouraging respect for the value of students' prior experiences and cultural perspectives.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of literature circles is in their ability to help students move beyond the information driven approach to reading common to L2 learners. According to the transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1988), readers approach a text from one of two stances. The efferent stance

is a search for information in the text. It seeks to answer *who-what-when-where-why* questions. The aesthetic stance looks at more personal, affective, and qualitative aspects of the text. Mature readers can adopt either stance and often use both together. However, developing readers, including L2 readers, often only have access to the efferent stance. Literature circles have the potential to move readers into a more aesthetic interpretation of the text by breaking up the reading to be approached from several angles. By having each student discuss the text from a different perspective to find and analyze key elements of the text, the group is able to deal with it more deeply than any one member could on their own (Furr, 2007).

Literature circles in a global issues curriculum

A global issues syllabus can have a very ambitious set of goals. Along with the language learning goals, Dyer and Bushell (1996) give a succinct definition of the requirements of global issues education that focuses on three points: knowledge, understanding, and attitudes. According to them, the program should strive to teach knowledge of the facts surrounding each issue, an understanding of the connections and interdependencies of the various issues to each other, and an awareness of the students' own attitudes towards and their personal connections to the issues. If we add the goal of developing the analytical skills, critical stance and open-minded quality of thought necessary for critical thinking; we have a very full syllabus. Literature circles can help accomplish these goals.

Firstly, literature circles can be a new avenue of approach to raising students' self awareness in global issues classes.

By having the students read and discuss fiction related to the issue under discussion, the teacher is bringing in a new framework with which to approach aspects of the topic. In a global issues context, this is important since many of the issues, such as global warming or deforestation, are common in the mass media. The students have seen them many times before. They may have an established attitude and not really consider the issue freshly when they learn about its facts and figures in English. But literature circles can reinvent a known issue by making it about people the students grow to care for through the reading experience. This can help students look at the issue with fresh eyes and reexamine their pre-existing attitudes.

On the other hand, some of the topics in global issues classes, such as genetic engineering or stem cell research, will be new. They will be far out of the students' experiences. They most likely will not have had any direct experience with them and may not have even thought about the issues before. They need to see how issues, which are all but unreal for them, fit into their existing knowledge base and connect to their lives. The eyes of a fictional character may be a powerful way for students to experience these issues. Shang (2006) has found that literature in content-based instruction contexts can help students explore and reflect on their existing knowledge base and their attitudes towards this kind of issue, which they may not otherwise have considered.

Secondly, looking at the goal of developing critical thinking, literature circles can be excellent practice in analytical skills. Students break up the text, look for connections to the real world, analyze cultural assumptions

of the characters and the story-teller and think about why the characters do what they do and say what they say. This kind of in-depth analysis and evaluation of underlying assumptions and connections can be an important step in critical thinking.

Literature circles can also be important in fostering the self-evaluative stance needed for critical thinking. Yang (2002) shows how fictional texts about social dilemmas and emotional conflicts demand personal responses and value judgments from readers. Literature circles can help students draw conclusions and examine value judgments about the characters or story and thus about their own lives. The roles of *Connector* and *Culture Collector* are directly relevant here. Students are required to find and discuss aspects of the story that they see as relevant to their own lives and culture.

Another benefit of work with literature circles is their potential to break down the maintenance of ideas in the face of new information, which Van Gelder (2005) highlights as a major obstacle in the process of teaching critical thinking. Oster (1989) says that literature fosters critical thinking by dramatizing and personalizing a situation in a way that expository text cannot. Students can see how information can be filtered by the characters point of view. This encourages them to not only learn information, but to actually examine their own points of view and, perhaps, change their ideas.

Work with literature circles also represents a chance to work with a topic over a longer term. Global issues texts often jump from one issue to another very quickly. Motegi, Hesse, and Suzuki (2001), for example, cover 10 issues in text seemingly designed for a single one-semester course. This kind of overview is necessarily shallow and can result

in an *issue-of-the-week* view of the class. By using literature circles, a teacher can maintain contact with the issue for a longer period of time, deepening and strengthening not only the students' knowledge of, but also their connection to it. This is the kind of long-term sustained contact with content that Pally (2001) has shown to result in deeper and more critical argumentation from students.

The current study: A literature circles project

Literature circles were piloted in the second semester of an elective high intermediate communication class that focused on global issues. The class did not have a main textbook. Rather, the materials for the course were designed in-house so that they could be coordinated with the topics the students were studying in their L1 seminar classes. Four topics per semester were chosen and studied for three weeks each for a total of 18 class hours per topic. The class was team-taught by two teachers who both participated in facilitating the literature circle discussions.

Choice of materials

Novels whose central theme or topic matched the topics of the class syllabus were chosen to be used as part of the class materials (see Table 2). The novels were chosen by the instructor for their interest, level and content. While authentic materials could have been used, in light of the difficulty in working with them, graded readers were selected. As Furr (2004) says,

For EFL students, the core of successful literature circles is the fact they do allow students to

participate in “real-life,” meaningful discussions about the texts/stories that they’ve read; thus, it is important for the teacher to choose materials which promote reading fluency for use in literature circles. In other words, students should be able to read Literature Circle texts without using a dictionary. (p.5)

Procedures

Novels were assigned at the beginning of each 3-week topic unit. Groups were formed and students were individually assigned one of six roles following Furr’s (2007) model. One modification was made, however. The role of connector, originally intended to find connections between the story and the real world, was expanded to include finding connections between the story and the other class materials and topics. The class followed a reading schedule set by the teacher (generally one chapter per day) and the students were given 30 minutes per class to discuss the novels in literature circles. Roles were regularly changed as groups moved through the novel.

Table 2. Examples of recommended graded readers for use with global issues classes.

Issue	Title (Publisher)
Biotechnology	Brave New World (Penguin)
Terrorism	Skyjack (Oxford)
Poverty	High Life, Low Life (Cambridge)
Colonialism	Weep Not Child (Macmillan)

Results

Data for this project was collected in class observations, assessment of test answers and student self-evaluation surveys, both closed and open-ended.

Both team-teachers collected data in class observation logs. Observations of student interactions showed steadily increasing depth of discussions about the texts. As students became more comfortable with the roles, they noticed more and more details about the text and were able to draw more connections to both their own experiences and the other class materials. They discussed the story in terms of what they would have done in a similar situation and looked for clues in the characters' backgrounds that could be used to explain their behavior. Students were also observed applying the techniques of analysis introduced and used in literature circles to other class materials.

In evaluating the students' test performance, examples of critical thinking were also seen. The students were tested in an interview format at the end of each topic. They were asked to discuss relevant aspects of the topic in a small group. References to the literature circle texts were common in their answers and the discussions showed considerable depth of critical thinking. They evaluated various characters' behavior and decided the appropriateness of actions based not only on the context of the story, but also on the background of the characters and the context of the current real world situation. Students also regularly commented on opinions they had previously held but changed as they read and discussed the novel.

In student self-evaluations, the students completed a survey about the experience and reported very positive reactions. They stated that they understood the text better

because of the literature circles (4.7 out of a possible 5 on a Likert scale) and that their understanding of the class topic was also improved by discussing the novel (4.3 out of 5). Comments in the open-ended questions bore out these results as several students noted that the roles, especially of *Connector* and *Collector*, were difficult but very helpful in understanding the story. The students also noted that the literature circles helped them connect to other class materials.

The students also overwhelmingly gave the overall literature circles experience a positive rating saying that they enjoyed it (4.3 out of 5). And all students either agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to participate in a reading circle program again in the future (see table 3).

Discussion

When this project began, it was anticipated that there would be some resistance to the use of literature circles among the students. The class instructors felt students may object to mixing fiction and factual content and bringing literature (and reading homework) into what was supposed to be an issues-based speaking class. Results obtained in the end of semester surveys indicate that these fears were unfounded and that the application of literature circles was successful. Students' responses to the survey prompts showed that they not only enjoyed the literature circles, but also clearly saw their value in the global issues context. The reading roles helped students in understanding the contents of the novel. And the connections drawn by students between the novel and the real world issue under discussion helped them in understanding the other class contents.

Table 3. Results of a class survey on literature circles: Scores shown on a 5-point Likert scale.

The reading discussions helped me understand the novel better.	4.7
Having a reading circle job helped me understand the novel better.	4.7
Having a reading circle job made the group discussions easier.	4.1
I liked discussing the book with a group.	4.3
Reading and discussing this novel helped me understand the class topic better.	4.3
It was useful to have different members of the group do different jobs.	4.6
I would like to participate in reading circles again.	4.3

Before the project began, it was also predicted that the successful application of literature circles to a global issues syllabus would improve the students' critical thinking skills, based on the three-part definition given above. While critical thinking is admittedly difficult to measure, the results do seem to bear out the hypothesis. Class observations and analysis of test answers clearly indicate improvements in the quality of the students' analytical skills and the frequency with which those skills were applied. The students probed for root causes and explored reasons behind opinions in a way not seen in the first semester of the course (before the introduction of literature circles). Also, the fact that students explicitly referred to their own previously held opinions indicates changes towards a more questioning stance and open-mindedness. They seem to have developed a more objective view of opinions and beliefs, both others' and their own.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that this study focuses on the results of a small scale pilot survey done in a motivated elective class. Applications of literature circles with the intention of improving critical thinking will need to be investigated in larger scale environments, where the students may not be as highly motivated.

Conclusion

The benefits of reading, especially extensive reading, in L2 development are well known and literature circles have the potential to help students become more mature readers and critical thinkers. The student discussions associated with literature circles not only give the students a chance for real, considered output, but they also help the students see the text, and thus the issue under discussion, from new angles. In global issues based classes, implementing literature circles has been shown to both foster the kind of inquisitive stance associated with critical thinking and provide opportunities to practice the analytical skills needed to encourage the development of critical thinking skills.

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