

IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION THROUGH LITERATURE CIRCLES

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ABSTRACT

This research was done to test the effect of using Literature Circles to improve the reading comprehension ability of third grade (year 12) Islamic high school students from MAN Cot Gue, Aceh Besar. The objective of this study was to find out if the use of Literature Circles could improve the students' reading comprehension more than the teacher-centered (Reading-Aloud) approach. This study used an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) each with 20 students. The EG was taught using Literature Circles, while the CG was taught using the teacher-centered (reading aloud) approach. The data for this research were collected by means of a pre-test and a post-test. The tests given used multiple choice questions to find out the students' understanding of the reading narrative text used for the test. The collected data were then analyzed by using the t-test formula. The research findings showed that the mean of the post test of the EG was 58, while that of the CG was 41. The result from the t-test was 4.69 while the t-table at a level of significance with $\alpha = 0.05$ was 1.697, which means that the students who were taught using Literature Circles did significantly better in reading comprehension than those who were not. In conclusion Literature Circles can be a better ways for teaching English reading comprehension for third grade (year 12) senior high school ESL students.

Keywords: *Literature Circles, Teaching Reading, Narrative Texts.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four language skills taught to learners of English. It cannot be learned quickly and effortlessly. Therefore, teaching reading comprehension is very necessary for senior high school ESL students to improve their ability in identifying the author's ideas. As one of the receptive skills, it is important for students to master reading comprehension. They should have a good understanding of all aspects of reading such as the main idea, inferences, details and understanding of vocabulary to reach the passing grade for reading comprehension. The purpose of teaching reading is to develop the abilities of students to be effective and efficient in reading.

According to Lehr (2013), reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This means that reading comprehension is an active process, being able to read

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many different materials and being able to understand them (Fitriani, 2015; Samad, Jannah, Fitriani, 2017).

Referring to the Standard English Competency requirements for senior high schools, the students are expected to develop their ability to comprehend short functional texts and essays such as narratives, explanations and discussions in daily life contexts to access knowledge. In fact, the average score for the English reading comprehension proficiency of the third grade students was still far below 70, the school curriculum criteria.

There are many methods and approaches available for the teaching-learning processes to develop the capabilities of students. The teacher needs to consider the best method and the most appropriate techniques or strategies for teaching reading comprehension for the reasons mentioned above. One of these is the co-operative learning method. Kagan (1994) as cited in Kasim (2011) has stated that co-operative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. In short, the researcher used literature circles as an active way to improve the reading comprehension of students, increasing the communication between students, and giving individual students an active role in the learning process because they have to focus on the task given them.

Noe and Johnson (2004) have noted that Literature Circles are small groups of students discussing a piece of literary work in depth. It gives students a way to build critical thinking and reflection when they read, discuss and respond to the reading. The students develop their own understanding as they discuss meanings with the other readers.

Moreover, Furr (2004) has stated that EFL Literature Circles are fun, focused classroom-based student reading and discussion groups. In short, the teacher can present an interesting reading for students and choose the material that increases their motivation to study. This technique allows the students to have a group discussion leader, a summarizer, a word master, a connector, a culture collector and a passage person in each group. The program benefits not only the group but also each individual student; it increases the amount of reading students do, provides opportunities for inquiry and critical thinking, and teaches students how to work together co-operatively.

Daniels (1994) says that Literature Circles are small, temporary discussion groups composed of students who are reading the same work of literature and each group member has specific responsibilities during the discussion sessions. The circles meet regularly, and the discussion roles change at each meeting; when the circle finishes a book, the members decide on a way to present the results of their study of the literary work to the rest of the class.

In line with the background for this study, the researcher formulated the research problem as follows: Will there be any significant difference in Reading Comprehension achievements between students who are taught by using Literature Circles and those who are taught through the teacher centred (Reading - Aloud) approach amongst third grade (year 12) students from MAN Cot Gue in Aceh Besar?

The purpose of this research was to find out if there will be a significant difference in the achievements of third grade students from MAN Cot Gue Aceh Besar who will be taught by means of Literature Circles and those who will be taught through the teacher centred (Reading-Aloud) approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section starts with a literature review focusing on definitions of reading comprehension, theories relating to the implementation of Literature Circles, teaching reading activities, Literature Circles procedure, and the benefits of Literature Circles for improving teaching of reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension

Reading is an activity in which a reader usually interacts with a text in a close situation and must be studied from junior high school up to university level. Miller (1990, p. 3) has said that “reading is a process of communication of ideas from one person to another through the medium of writing or printing to seek the ideas behind words”. It means that reading is a process of understanding the meaning of a text for readers to get knowledge and new information from what they have read.

Meanwhile, reading is a construction of new meanings through manipulation of concepts already possessed by the reader with resulting meaning. After the reader reads the text, he tries to get the meaning word by word and sentence by sentence then later on he interprets the meaning based on the context that brings the result of what he has read. Michigan (2009, p. 17) has said that “reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among: (1) the reader’s existing knowledge, (2) the information suggested by the text being read, and (3) the context (purpose) of the reading situation”. This means that reading is an active process of reconstructing meaning from written language.

Comprehension is an important aspect of reading. Reading comprehension is basically the essence of the reading process. Snow (2014) has said that reading is a process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language that consists of three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity or purpose of reading.

In conclusion, comprehension is the whole point of reading. Comprehension involves prior knowledge, knowledge of text structure, and an active search for information. This means that reading comprehension is the search for meaning, actively using the reader’s knowledge of vocabulary including knowledge of collocations and idioms with the text being studied to understand each new thing the reader reads.

The Description of Literature Circles

There are many concepts of Literature Circles, but every concept has one basic point in common: each student is responsible for most of their own learning. All definitions also focus on students working co-operatively in order to help each other in their learning achievements. Authors also focus on the students who lead the learning activities (Daniels, 1994). Some definitions, say that Literature Circles are co-operative approaches that give students the opportunity to control and manage their own learning. According to Daniels (2002), Literature Circles provide an opportunity for students to engage with their peers about a selected text. They have responses with their peers, listen respectfully to one another, sometimes disagree strongly, but dig back into the text to settle arguments or validate different interpretations. He claims that there are many teachers today who have dropped the traditional method of teaching reading to involve their students in some type of small, peer

group reading discussion groups. Based on this, Literature Circles are small, temporary discussion groups composed of students who are reading the same work of literature and who each have a specific responsibility during the discussion sessions. The circles meet regularly, and the discussion roles change at each meeting; when the circle finishes a book, the members decide on a way to showcase the results of their discussions about their literary work to the rest of the class.

According to Rogers and Leochko (2002), Literature Circles are also a forum that provides students with opportunities to interact with reading material at different levels. Students examine literal aspects of the book, make connections to their own lives and seek out elements of the story that are important and an activity that helps to establish positive reading behaviours in students by demonstrating co-operation and communication within a group. A literature circle invites students to become part of a community of readers. Students take part in discussions with other readers with varied backgrounds and reading experiences. By encountering the reactions and opinions of others to literature, students develop a better understanding of their own views and thoughts.

Daniels (1994) has also stated that Literature Circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article or book. While they are reading, each member of the group is assigned a portion of the text to study (either in or outside of the class), members make notes to help them contribute to the upcoming discussions and each member comes to the group with ideas to share.

Furr (2004) has another definition almost the same as the one by Daniels, taking into account that both are focused on the concept of students meeting with the specific purpose of reading for pleasure and self-improvement. According to Furr (ibid), literature circles are small student-directed reading groups that focus on discussing texts in the classroom and they need some tools in order to have interesting, fun discussions about the stories they have been reading. If we analyse the definitions above we can see that all of them focus on student centred learning.

To summarize the definitions given by these authors, literature circles can be defined as discussion groups where the readers gather for reading discussions not only for the pleasure of reading but to develop critical capacities for thinking and reading. These reading discussions create a co-operative environment that provides the people involved with a huge opportunity to develop and explore their ideas and thoughts and to develop the capacity for critically analysing and responding to the reading materials that they have been given or have chosen.

The Use of Literature in the Language Classroom

In more recent years, using literature in English language classrooms has become a topic frequently discussed in teaching circles. Many teachers have started using parts of famous literary texts in their classrooms and many publishers have started incorporating parts of original literature in their textbooks. Collie and Slater (1990, p. 3) have said that there are four main reasons why teachers should use literature in their classrooms, viz.:

- a. Valuable authentic material
Authenticity of learning material is very important in the language learning process, because it prepares learners for “real life” language usage. Teachers believe that non-

authentic learning material teaches students less usable language skills and presents isolated conversations/writings rarely seen in real life.

b. Cultural enrichment

The second is cultural enrichment. Teachers have known for a long time that we cannot teach a language without teaching about its culture. The two are inseparably intertwined, which is why the correct use of a language partly depends on understanding its cultural background.

c. Language enrichment

The third is language enrichment. All language learners have to be aware that learning a language is a constant enrichment of one's second language vocabulary. Without vocabulary enrichment the learning process will stop at the acquisition level and a learner will never learn to use the language, at least not appropriately.

d. Personal involvement

The last reason for using literary texts in EFL classrooms is personal involvement. Personal involvement is an inevitable part of reading books or any other literary work; moreover, the writer expects from a reader to get personally involved in order to grasp the idea(s) that she is trying to convey through her literary expressions.

Many other linguists also promote the use of literature in foreign language classrooms. Parkinson and Thomas (2000, pp. 9-11), for example, list ten ways that a student can benefit from literature. Some of these reasons overlap with the reasons given by Collie and Slater above. They are as follows: cultural enrichment, linguistic models, mental training, extension of linguistic competence, authenticity, memorability, rhythmic resources, motivating materials, openness to interpretation and convenience.

The Roles of Literature Circles in Language Classroom

In classrooms all across the country, literature circles are being used by teachers to promote better thinking skills and higher reading levels amongst their students. According to Maher (2013), literature circles should be set up with each student in each group having a different 'role' each week. This role will involve doing 'role work,' which they will submit to their teacher, and share with their fellow classmates. This section will address those aspects of literature circles for teachers to implement.

Vocabulary Lists before Reading

Nation (2009) stresses the importance of recycling vocabulary as a way for students to learn new words. One way to recycle important vocabulary is to create vocabulary lists or lists of idioms or collocations that students will pre-study before an actual reading.

Student Roles

Daniels (2002) lists 6 potential student roles, such as Questioner or Discussion Leader, Illustrator, Passage Master, Connector, Summarizer and Word Wizard. Furr (2004) uses Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word Master, Passage Person, and Culture Connector. However, Maher (2013), a senior instructor at the English Language Centre of the University of Macau, has modified the assigned roles, and would like to share what they do, and what 'role work' each of his students is assigned prior to their literature circle meetings. Some of these are combined into his own assigned roles and, as well, he has created

new ones. For organization of their literature circles, he creates a list of five roles, with each group consisting of five members. This means that the group will stay together for five weeks, for each student to experience each role. After five weeks, he mixes group members so that they start working with different people.

Teacher's Role in Literature Circles

The teacher's role is to monitor group discussions and help students collectively understand the text. Particularly, the teacher should focus on problems based around language, idioms, and cultural concepts that prove difficult to understand.

Furthermore, research conducted by Stein and Bede (2004) has studied the roles that teachers play within literature circles. These researchers identified four roles that teachers take on during these discussion groups – viz: facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener. According to their research, the *Facilitator* role involved the teachers encouraging students' interaction and talk and to monitor social interactions which interfered with discussion. This role was commonly observed especially during the first year of the study.

The second role looked at the teacher as a *Participant*. This involved teachers interacting as readers by sharing personal connections, opinions, and questions that stemmed from their personal understanding of the book.

The third role identified the teacher as a *Mediator*. This role involved teachers using facilitator or participant talk to encourage students to connect their discussions about the book to their own life experiences and values.

The final role identified by the researchers was *Active Listener*. This role moved away from teacher dominated discussions and left the control up to group negotiation. Some behaviours noted by the researchers in this group were "active listening" behaviours such as "yeah" or "hmm". The students were more likely to interrupt or talk on top of one another and to compete for the attention of an "adult" presence.

The Procedure for Implementing Literature Circles

Lin (2004) explains their procedure for implementing literature circles, which includes: reading material selection, community building, the number of students in each circle, preparation for the discussions plus sharing and discussions.

Reading Material Selection

The reading materials used in literature circles are important to stimulate lively and meaningful discussions (Farinacci, 1998). Some authors, including Farinacci (ibid) and Peralta-Nash and Dutch (2000, p. 23), have suggested the following criteria for selecting texts to use in literature circles:

- comprehensible to students of different abilities and interests,
- reflect students' language needs and skills,
- address issues/topics relevant to students' lives, and
- provoke thinking and discussion by the students.

Community Building

One belief is that a primary function of literature circles is to create a classroom community in which students and teachers can learn from and with each other (King, 2001). Farinacci (1998) recommends that the teacher discuss the following topics with students: (1) how to handle unknown words, (2) how to respond and provide feedback amongst circle participants, (3) how to select topics for discussion, and (4) how to get along as a group.

Number of Participants in Each Circle

In each literature circle, learners need time and opportunities to express their ideas and to respond to other members in thoughtful and probing ways (Brabham & Villaume, 2000). They suggest that four to eight participants are the ideal number for a literature circle, although effective discussion may also occur between as few as two learners or as many as an entire class.

Preparation for Discussion

Preparation for discussion involves students not only becoming familiar with the text being read but also being prepared to fulfil the various different roles in the discussion. These roles may either be assigned by the teacher or selected by the students themselves and are usually rotated with each new reading.

Sharing and Discussion

After all members in a circle have finished their reading and role preparations, they should assemble and begin their discussions. Students should bring their written responses or assignment sheets and use these as guides for the discussions, but some believe the discussion topics should not be limited by these (Gilbert, 2000). When working with students having little experience in literature circles, teachers may need to model appropriate discussion behaviours, including thoughtful responses regarding the readings, respectful feedback to the interpretations of others, and good listening and questioning skills. Furr (2004, p. 6) has stated that in a Literature Circle there are six roles as follows:

1. Group Discussion Leader (GDL)
The group discussion leader is the leader who controls the flow of the discussions. She asks each of the group members, one by one, to retell and explain facets of the story based on each person's role. Then, she asks group member some open-ended questions about the story.
2. Summarizer (S)
The summarizer's job is to briefly and completely summarize the story and is given to all members of the group at the beginning of the discussion session.
3. Connector (C)
The connector's role is to try to find connections between the text and the real world in which we live. The connector has to find some experiences from the group that relate to the short story.
4. Word Master (WM)
The role of word master are to find five important words, phrases or collocations in the short story and to explain the meanings of them to the members of the group but

before defining them the Word Master may ask the opinions of the members about the chosen words and/or phrases with simple questions.

5. Passage Person (PP)

The passage person's job is to find and bring to the group's attention important, interesting or difficult parts of the reading, parts that may be important for the story's events (the plot) or to explain the characters, to find and bring to the group's attention passages with especially interesting or powerful language.

6. Culture Collector

Furr (2004, p. 8) defines the Culture Collector's job is to look at the story and note both differences and similarities between the culture represented in the story and the group's own culture.

The Benefit of Literature Circles in Teaching Reading Comprehension

There are many benefits of using literature circles for teaching reading comprehension. They not only develop the abilities of students but they also contribute to improve students' communication skills and to foster social and interpersonal skills.

As stated by Lin (2004), the benefits of literature circles which some studies have identified include: (a) stronger reader-text relationships, (b) improved classroom climates, (c) enhanced degrees of gender equity and understanding, and (d) a learning environment more conducive to the needs and abilities of English language learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The design of this study used the Experimental Research method which had an Experimental Group (EG), which was given the treatment, and a Control Group (CG), which was given the standard or conventional treatment. Furthermore, the purpose of the study was to measure the effect of the treatment (the independent variable) upon the dependent variable, the EG, while the purpose of the CG was to provide the base against which the results from the EG can be compared.

In this study, the population was all of the third grade students of the Islamic Senior High School at Cot Gue in Aceh Besar District. The samples were two classes of 20 students selected by random sampling from the five, third grade classes at the school. The researcher tried to get information about the characteristic of the students in the sample before conducting the experimental study. Based on the interview with their English teacher, the students who were in the sample have similar ability at reading and they did not take any special ESL courses outside the school's activities.

By doing this Experimental research, it is expected that (1) the students will be assisted by using this approach in their final Examinations for the English course especially in reading comprehension, (2) the researcher will make a contribution to her district by introducing this approach for the students of schools there, and (3) the Literature Circles approach for reading comprehension will be introduced to the English teacher at the school.

Research instruments

Pre-test

The pre-test was administered to both the EG and the CG at the first meeting before the treatment was started. The students were asked to answer a number of questions in a multiple choice format after reading five short narrative texts that were presented sequentially. There were 20 questions each with four options (a, b, c, d, and e). Each correct answer was given 5 marks. If all questions were answered correctly the student would score 100, and if none were correct, they would score 0. This pre-test was given to find out their competence in reading comprehension before the researcher gave the treatment by applying the Literature Circles technique.

Post-test

A post-test was given to both groups after the treatment to find out their development in reading comprehension after the application of the Literature Circles technique. Both the pre-test and the post-test used the same questions.

Data Collection Procedure

In collecting the data, the procedure used was an experimental study. The data was collected from the tests. Prior to the treatment, the pre-test was given to both the EG and the CG classes to find out the students' starting proficiency level in reading comprehension. Then, the EG was given the treatment for five meetings in which they were taught using Literature Circles, whereas the CG was taught using the standard teacher-centred approach. The narrative texts used in the teaching-learning were the same for both groups.

Data Analysis

Means, variance, standard deviation and t-test were used to analyse the data. Before calculating the t-test, the data was analyzed for normality and for homogeneity. The final results were presented using a frequency distribution table.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The t-test of the pretest was lower than the score of t-table; $t_{test} < t_{table}$ ($0.22 < 1.697$) so there was no significant difference in the initial reading comprehension ability of both groups. The t-test for the post-test was higher than the t-table: $t_{test} > t_{table}$ ($4.69 > 1.697$). hence H_0 was rejected and H_a was accepted, which meant that the EG students who were taught reading comprehension by using Literature Circles got significantly better results than the CG students taught the standard way.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the explanations and the research findings presented above, the conclusions are as follows:

1. There was a significant positive difference between the results from the students who were taught by the Literature Circles technique and the students who were taught with the standard teacher-centred approach (Reading Aloud) which can be seen from the

scores from the EG and the CG. The EG mean post-test score was 58 and the CG was 41 which was significantly higher.

2. The Literature Circles were effective to increase students ability in reading comprehension. This was proved by the T -test, which was higher than the t-table: $t_{test} > t_{table}$ ($4.69 > 1.697$) which meant that H_0 was rejected and H_a was accepted.

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