

Why and How to Use EFL Literature Circles

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Why Use EFL Literature Circles?

EFL Literature Circles are fun, focused classroom-based student reading and discussion groups which naturally combine the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Actually, literature circles are not only fun for students, but in some ways they are magic as well! Literature circles are magic in that they have the power to transform our Japanese students from passive, rather shy, reticent students into students who eagerly point at their texts in order to support their arguments while sharing their opinions *in English!*

Almost every language or literature teacher has, at some time, asked students to read a story or text as homework and then come to class prepared to discuss the story. Well, we all know that students are often very resistant to this type of assigned reading and whole class discussion. Even native English speaking students often claim that their “least favorite,” “most hated,” or “most difficult” courses in high school are their Reading or Literature classes. If even English speaking students hate these courses, how can we make talking about literature interesting for our EFL students?

One American teacher/researcher, Harvey Daniels, and his colleagues decided to experiment with bringing the centuries-old tradition of informally talking about stories and books into elementary and secondary classes. These researchers realized that while adults had been enjoying both reading and informally discussing books together for hundreds of years, when students are asked to read or study literature in a traditional school setting, the enjoyment, excitement and passion that can be found in adult reading groups is all but lost.

Daniels and his fellow teacher-researchers in Chicago knew from years of experience that their L1 students would often just “go through the motions” in their Reading and Literature courses since, as mentioned above, most students stated that they really disliked these classes. As an EFL teacher who has taught in the US, Armenia, Palau and Japan, the writer of this article can certainly empathize with these teachers in Chicago. I can't count the number of times that I have asked students to read something that I thought would be both interesting and exciting for them, only to be disappointed by a good many blank stares when I tried to lead a class discussion or to ask class members to share their thoughts about a particular story. Since I have started to use literature circles in Japanese universities, the blank stares have disappeared. They have been replaced by students eagerly talking with each other about the stories they've read; referring to the text to support their arguments; asking insightful questions about their reading assignments; writing copiously in order to be ready to participate in the literature circle groups; and conducting their discussions almost solely *in English*.

EFL Literature Circles: What are they?

EFL literature circles are small student reading groups which provide a specific framework allowing EFL students to have real, meaningful discussions about literature in English.

Successful EFL Literature Circles will contain most of the following ten features:

1. Instructors select reading materials appropriate for their student population.

For EFL students, the core of successful literature circles is the fact that they 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 graded reading 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. While Literature Circles employ a combination of both intensive and extensive reading skills, the text itself must be material that is appropriate for *extensive* reading. A good test to discover whether a not a text is suitable for use in an EFL Literature Circle is to follow recommendations for extensive reading made by Rob Waring and Sachiko Takahashi in *The Why and How of Using Graded Readers*.

Here are some good ‘rules of thumb’ for students to find their reading level:
There should be no more than 2-3 unknown words per page.
The learner is reading 8-10 lines of text or more per minute.
The learner understands almost all of what she is reading with few pauses.
(Waring & Takahashi 2000: 11)

Actually, with literature circles, it is best to start with a graded reader that is one level below the actual student reading level because literature circles are based on the ability of our students, not only to read, but also to discuss the texts in English, so the materials must be manageable. In other words, if a student is found to be able to read at Stage Three of a graded reader using the method mentioned above, he may be using context clues to understand some of the words; thus, while he can generally comprehend the text, he may not be able to *produce* the language required to discuss the reading with his classmates in the literature circle group. Therefore, it is best to start at one level below the true reading levels.

2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor’s discretion.

When using literature circles for the first time in a class, it is probably best for the teacher to “manage” the group dynamics in order to have at least one outgoing

student in each small group. There will usually be five or six members in each group, so if it is possible, having two stronger students in each group will help to assure a successful literature circle, especially the first time that this concept is tried in class. This writer did not manage the groups the first time I tried it with Japanese students; rather, I let students divide into groups on their own, and needless to say, when five very shy students formed a discussion group, the group discussion was not as successful as it could have been.

3. Different groups are usually reading the same text.

While L1 students are encouraged to choose reading materials for literature circles, our EFL students may often lack, but are interested in, some of the historical or cultural backgrounds of the stories they read. With each group reading the same stories, we can allow the students to first get hooked by the story and then sneak in a mini-lecture to the entire class after the groups have finished their discussions. For example, after students finish reading and discussing a graded version of a horror story by Edgar Allan Poe, they are more than willing to listen to a mini-lecture about Poe's life and the historical and social issues raised in the story; thus, the Literature Circle readings and discussions serve to pique the student's interest in social and cultural issues, and before they even realize it, they are constructing quite complex questions in English in order to satisfy their curiosity!

4. When books are finished, *readers may prepare a group project and/or the Instructor may provide additional information to "fill in some of the gaps" in student understanding.* After the group projects or additional instruction, new groups are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion.

After the groups finish their discussions, the Instructor may then ask the groups to produce something reflecting the group's work. For example, each group may make a poster relating the major themes in the story and then explain the poster to the other groups. Instructors may teach students how to do a simple plot diagram (Freytag's Pyramid) and each group can then draw them on the board and explain the plot diagram to the entire class. Students often find it very interesting to learn that their classmates in other groups may have all discovered a different possible *Climax* for the same story. Again, because the literature circle framework allows students to feel that they are having meaningful discussions about the stories, students are often very motivated when asked to produce the group project—once they've been hooked by the story, anything is possible!

5. Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading.

Literature Circles meet on a regular, predictable schedule, and I contend that this is one crucial aspect to the success of literature circles. EFL Literature circles require a good deal of student training time; thus, a teacher must be willing to commit to several *cycles* (stories) with literature circles if there are to be positive results. Again, this cannot be stated too strongly: one should not even consider trying literature

discussion circles as a “one off” classroom activity. In college classrooms, it is a good idea to allow one full class period as a training session. This writer gives each student a copy of the five Role Sheets and encourages students to take notes on the Role Sheets so that they will remember exactly what to do later when it is their turn to play a certain role. It’s best to put the students into groups of five or six, explain the Role Sheets one-by-one in simplified English and then allow the students to speak amongst themselves to confirm that they understand the purpose of each of the Role Sheets. The Role Sheets are the *magic* formula powering the literature circle, so it is imperative that students understand each of them. Finally, through the informal discussions, literature circles promote a natural integration of reading, speaking, listening and writing and students get better at integrating these skills as they practice using them over and over during the school year; thus, it is important to hold literature circles on a regular basis.

6. Students use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and their discussion.

This is the “magic” of literature circles; the Role Sheets (described in the next section below) prompt each member of a small reading group to read a story from a different perspective and to prepare for a small group discussion based on their reading. In this way, students are learning that there are both a number of different reasons for reading and varying perspectives on any given text. The Role Sheets break reading down into smaller sub-skills with each student in her small group closely focusing on one way of encountering the text. After each student has read the story from a given perspective (role) as homework, then the students are brought together, and through discussion, these parts become whole. In other words, the Role Sheets break down the skills of a mature reader into smaller, manageable parts so that each member of the group is responsible for one aspect of what a mature reader does naturally. For instance, one student will act as the Summarizer, and his job will be to read the story from a global standpoint in order to produce a brief plot summary while another group member will act as the Passage Person and do a close reading of the text in order to point out passages which are interesting or confusing in the story. Finally, when the group meets in class for discussion, all of the skills of a mature reader are reassembled, and the parts form a powerful whole. When a literature circle goes well, one can easily see many EFL students operating in something akin to what Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development;” that is to say, EFL students are able to discuss issues in English and to solve problems in collaboration with their peers that they cannot possibly deal with on their own. While the individual Role Sheets are fairly simple and straightforward, when they are combined in a discussion group, EFL students are able to engage in complex textual analysis and academic discussion. After the first literature circle cycle in my classes, I always give the students an anonymous post-discussion survey. One of the most common comments that I receive from students is that “I like literature circles because I feel that I can really discuss these stories in English since I know exactly what I’m supposed to talk about (do) when we discuss the stories in my group.” The “magic” of the Role Sheet lies in the fact that it gives students a clear purpose for reading the story; thus, when they

meet in their groups in class, students are confident that they know what they are going to talk about in their group.

7. Discussion *topics come from the students.*

Because we are trying to promote the informal discussion of stories in the classroom, it is very important to allow students to generate the topics for discussion. This is often very difficult for teachers as we are accustomed to “teaching” students and asking them questions which we believe will help them to discover the themes or important points in stories; however, if we choose interesting stories for our students, we must trust them to find the themes for themselves. Of course, by breaking down the skills used by a mature reader, the Role Sheets provide a framework for students to use when talking about the stories in their literature circle groups, and this framework will ensure that students are having meaningful discussions even without teacher-directed questions.

8. Group meetings aim to be open, *natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions and open-ended questions are welcome.

Students are encouraged to share their opinions about the texts read for literature circles, so not all of the discussion will be “serious.” If students are complaining to each other about the story in their group, or if they are laughing about the story, we need to allow these natural conversations to occur because these are exactly the types of things which mature readers might do when discussing a story with friends.

9. The teacher serves as a *facilitator*, not a group member or instructor.

Again, teachers need to step back and allow students to assume responsibility for guiding the literature circle discussions. For many teachers, this is very difficult, but if we just sit in on each group and take notes concerning both student participation and the topics of interest discovered in the groups, we can then use this information to provide additional cultural or historical information to the students in the form of a “mini lecture” in simplified English. Teachers can also exploit topics which the students are interested in by assigning group projects for evaluation. This writer often has students do poster presentations after finishing their discussions. In this way, students work together to produce something which can then be presented in English to the other groups.

10. A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room.

Of course, if the literature circles are not fun, then we are simply repackaging the type of lessons which students tell us that they hate. Remember, the key is to promote informal talk about great stories!

Using the Literature Circle Role Sheets with EFL Students

Finally, a look at the *magic* formula for using literature circles with EFL students.

First, as we have seen from the definition, literature circles are small reading groups that meet in the classroom to discuss texts. These groups should be student-directed, but at the same time, our students need some tools in order to have interesting, fun discussions about the stories they've read. These tools come in the form of the Role Sheets that students use when meeting in their groups. There are five basic roles for EFL literature circle groups and one additional role for higher-level groups which can be introduced later in the term. (All of the student Role Sheets discussed below are available as pdf files at www.eflliteraturecircles.com)

- The first role is that of the **Group Discussion Leader** whose job is to act as a facilitator in the group and to keep the discussion flowing. The Group Discussion Leader is directed to read the story a number of times so that she has a very solid grasp of the possible themes and the basic plot of the story. The Discussion Leader opens the discussion with a few open-ended questions concerning the story (see example questions on the bottom of the GDL Role Sheet) and then proceeds to call on other group members to share their findings with the group. For the first time through literature circles with EFL students, as was mentioned earlier, it might be a good idea to manage the groups so that the Group Discussion Leaders are fairly outgoing students. This writer did not do this the first time using literature circles in Japan, but since that time, I have “managed” the first round of literature circles, and there is always far less confusion with a *strong* GDL in each group. I also stress to the students that the GDL’s job is *not* to be the “boss” but just to keep the conversation moving. *All students* are responsible to speak and to ask follow up questions.
- The second Role is that of the **Summarizer**. It is usually recommend that the summarizer present the summary early in the discussion so that everyone can remember the plot of the story. It’s important to emphasize that the summarizer gives a brief, but complete, summary of the plot. On the Role Sheet it says that the summary should be “a one or two minute summary,” but most often students take at least twice that long to read their summaries in the first few literature circle cycles. The idea here is for the Summarizer to understand that they are not to copy too much from the text; rather, the Summarizer needs to retell the story in her own words choosing only the most important events in the narrative. Other students are encouraged to ask the summarizer to read the summary a second time if that will help everyone to understand the plot a little better. By paying careful

attention to the plot of the story, the Summarizer is reading the story for general comprehension rather than studying literary language or devices. Many students have remarked that they really liked being the Summarizer because it forces them to read the story a number of times in order to pick out the most important points to present in their summary. Finally, students can also be taught how to make a simple plot diagram (Freytag's Pyramid) later in the term and then the Summarizer may be asked to both write a short narrative summary and to plot Freytag's Pyramid and share it with the group.

- The next role, **Connector**, is one that students often say is very difficult when we first start literature circles, but by the end of the year, many students think that both completing this role and listening to their classmates as Connector is the most interesting role. The Connector's role is to try to find connections between the text and the real world in which she lives. For example, the Connector may make connections between the thoughts, feelings or actions of characters in the story and family members, friends or classmates. Again, the Connector's role is quite challenging at first, so the teacher may want to assign this role to an outgoing student for the first round of literature circles. During class, this writer was amazed at some of the personal stories that students were sharing with each other after reading a section of *The Joy Luck Club*. These students were not only connecting with the story, they were also connecting with each other in ways that I had never witnessed in a Japanese college classroom.
- The fourth role is that of the **Word Master**. While the Group Discussion Leader and the Summarizer need to read the text and prepare to discuss the story from a global standpoint, the Word Master focuses on single words or very short phrases; thus, the WM is doing a very close reading of the text. The Word Master may choose only five words which he believes to be the most important words or very short phrases found in a story. Some students disliked the Word Master role in my class until I told them that they should look for special uses of common words and ask their classmates, "What do you think _____ means in this situation?" Or "Why does the writer repeat the word _____ eight times in the first two pages of this story?" The Word Master is *not* confined to defining new words, but should be encouraged to look for those words that she believes are important in the story. Later in the term, after a mini-lesson on simile and metaphor, the Word Master can be asked to look out for these literary devices and to explain what they mean or why they are important in a given story. Finally, I usually invite the WMs to either go to the library or to come to my office and use an EFL English-to-English Dictionary to define their words in a way that the whole group can easily understand. As a matter of fact, for my classes in Japan, all of the Role Sheets must be written using an English-to-English dictionary rather than a Japanese-English dictionary. This is important, of course, because these Role Sheets are actually notes which will guide the students' discussions; thus, everyone must write using vocabulary which can be easily understood by all members of the group.

- The last of the “traditional” roles is that of the **Passage Person**. Like the Word Master, the PP is asked to make a very close reading of the text and to look for well-written or key passages in the story. Like the Word Master, the PP may also be encouraged to look for literary devices, such as metaphors, once they have been taught in class. In many classes, the PP quite often chooses passages which he finds confusing. He then asks the group for help in understanding these passages. Some of the best discussion occurs as the students are trying to figure out difficult passages together; it is often at this point that one can readily see the theory of the “zone of proximal development” playing out in class. After having studied Freytag’s Pyramid, some of the PPs choose to look for passages containing the Complication or the Climax of a story.
- Finally, a newly created role is that of the **Culture Collector**. This role was created in response to the number of times that students have struggled with the cultural underpinnings and historical backgrounds of some of the stories read for literature circles. To have one student focus on cultural issues later in the term will add a further level of both interest and complexity to the discussions; thus, this is a role which should be introduced later in the term and possibly should be confined to use with intermediate students and above. 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 their own culture.

Finally, a look at what the students *do*, the first time that they meet. First, students are each given a copy of the **Reading Schedule** and then students choose or may be assigned a role, and they complete the reading schedule in their small group. Because almost every Japanese student has a cell phone with email capability, in my classes, most students exchange email addresses at the time of filling in the schedule. This writer always tells students that even if they are absent on the day of the literature circle meeting, they still *must* have their work ready and contact another group member to present their materials to the group. Making students responsible for their roles whether they are in class or not, really promotes both student responsibility and a very high attendance rate since when students realize that they have to do the homework whether they are absent or not, they often decide that it is easier to come to class and participate than to arrange to send in their homework by proxy.

To begin with, it is recommended that students read short stories (around 4-6 pages in a graded reader); thus, students are required to read and to prepare their particular role for the entire story prior to the next class.

Conclusion

As I stated at the very beginning of this article, this writer does believe that literature circles are *magic*. For EFL students, their magic works in a number of ways. First, EFL students feel as if they are having interesting, important discussions in English while

participating in literature circles. I contend that because the Literature Circle Role Sheets give each group of students a set of clear, yet complex, tasks, they are able to have discussions at a far deeper level than those commonly heard in EFL classrooms which use “course books” or “discussion-based” textbooks. The *magic* lies in the fact that the sum of these Role Sheets is far more complex than any of the individual parts. Second, EFL Literature Circles are *magic* because at their heart lie something that I did not even really touch on in my paper. While this paper focuses on the methodology of conducting EFL literature circles, let us not forget that at the heart of a literature circle is a great story. In all cultures, over thousands of years, people have been fascinated by a good story, and I can say from experience, that my students have been no exception. We have read stories ranging from those written by Mark Twain to little-known stories of Caribbean islanders, and in almost every case, these stories have reached students in ways that course books and other materials can not even approach. Finally, at least in the case of my Japanese first and second-year college students, literature circles have performed the magic of motivating students to read a good deal outside of class; to write copiously in order to be prepared for the group discussions; to speak in English over 95% of the time while in their groups; to eagerly point to passages within a text to support their arguments; and to question each other in order to figure out what the text really means. Is this magic? I believe so, but the only way to know for sure is to try it for yourself!