

Exploration, Analysis and Evaluation of Literature Circles in EFL:

A Case Study of Higher Intermediate
Young Adults in Vietnam

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Literature represents a unique source of input in English language learning and has been exploited using a variety of models and methodologies over the years. While individual, sustained reading has long been recognised as a means to support L2 learning, recent trends have suggested that to reach its full potential, extensive reading be placed within a framework integrating response to the text developed through interaction with peers, to combine reading with debate, discussion, interpretation and reflection.

This study represents an examination, analysis and evaluation of Literature Circles (LCs), a framework, which, it is argued, reflects such a model, and which is based on a case study conducted in a private language teaching centre in Vietnam. This investigation aims to seek evidence that opportunities for language learning emerge from within the co-construction of communication fostered by the interaction inherent in the learner-led, reader response groups of LCs – and are developed through the collaborative group work inspired by personal interpretation, and the collective negotiation of meaning.

The dissertation opens with an introduction outlining the paper and the research questions upon which it is based. This is followed by a literature review, which provides a brief overview of LCs, and then moves on to review ways in which literature has been situated within ELT, discussing its particular suitability as a resource to further language learning within a collaborative framework. Chapter 2 examines LCs as a catalyst for learning and looks at issues relating to the transfer to Second Language Learning from the L1 teaching environment in which they originated. The creation of opportunities for language acquisition within the dynamic of learner interaction and extensive reading encouraged by LCs is discussed within the fluid parameters of current SLA theories.

Chapter 3 outlines the case study undertaken to evaluate the impact of learner engagement in LCs on L2 learning and language acquisition in an EFL classroom setting consisting of higher intermediate learners in Vietnam, and provides the relevant information concerning data collection and analysis related to this.

Classroom recordings of learners taking part in LCs are transcribed and examined in chapter 4. It is here that reoccurring features emerging from and noticed within the group interaction are related to the research questions posed in the introduction. Relevant findings are later discussed, which reflect the belief, based on socio-cultural theory, that processes leading to opportunities for language acquisition can be identified as an emergent phenomenon, co-constructed within and interrelated to the support of peers within a social learning environment.

Additional qualitative evidence in the form of learner self-evaluation questionnaires, where performance and experience in LCs were reflected upon, suggests that perceptions of self-efficacy were improved upon through learner participation and collaboration, leading to increased motivation and learner autonomy.

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Potential for Impact:

Literature Circles, creating opportunities for collaborative learning at the interface of language learning and literature, are argued to offer a relevant, pedagogically sound approach to fostering language acquisition in ELT. The potential of LCs to impact on ELT as a pedagogical framework, is underpinned by the classroom-based research conducted and its findings, and encompasses several issues currently being discussed in the field. To highlight one, which is at the centre of this research, LCs are argued to create a multi-dimensional learning dynamic based on independent reading, reader response and collaborative learning – providing opportunities for noticing language, personal growth and cultural awareness, which it is argued, may lead to increased motivation (to engage), perceptions of increased self-efficacy, and ultimately, improved opportunities for second language acquisition to occur.

Extensive reading has long been championed as integral to successful, long term L2 acquisition. Task based learning and teaching is currently recognized as an articulated extension and successor to CLT and considered by many researchers to be the lead point in carrying out successful instructed SLA. LCs bring these two powerful motivators for L2 learning together, encapsulated within the equally powerful mechanism of collaborative learning, supported by current socio-cultural theories of SLA and motivation.

Language and language learning as an emergent phenomenon, as opposed to a static, reductionist view of the same, has made continuous inroads into the mainstream of current ELT thinking, but is not, perhaps, as accessible in current mainstream coursebooks and other material design as it could be.

This paper outlines a framework within which L2 learners are offered choice, opportunities to exercise and develop autonomy, and where language learning is treated as an organic process tempered by individual focus and interpretation. Teachers (and learners) are freed to provide appropriate scaffolding as learners engage in interpretation of the representational language inherent in literature-based learning. This is shaped and funnelled into authentic learning opportunities, where SLA is thought to occur, supported by learner-led noticing of language and post discussion extension, and propelled by the incentive found in collaborative interaction based on individual sustained reading.

LCs are argued to support, or perhaps be uniquely positioned at the forefront of current theories of L2 acquisition, and there would appear to be compelling reasons to incorporate them within ELT. The potential impact of incorporating LCs into ELT programmes, as has been outlined in this paper and in this particular case study, appears to be promising as well for the wider context of Second Language Learning. LCs appear to offer a great deal to the renewed interest in literature-based L2 learning, and share much with the research affirming the importance of task based learning, the developing view of language learning as an emergent system, and the importance of noticing language as a necessary condition for acquisition.