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Encouragement of Critical Thinking Through Literary Circles in EFL Instructional Settings: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The current research is an enlightening study of literary circles as an active instruction tool to develop critical thinking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. While integrating existing research into theoretical strengths, this study reflects that student-led book discussions engender EFL students to polish their analytical skills rigorously with robust evaluative judgment and deep reflection capabilities. This study examines the fundamental elements of literature circles, such as role definitions, interactive dialogue, and reflective techniques, that demonstrate their alignment with the growth of critical thinking. Language competency, cultural factors, and resource differences are significant challenges the research recognizes during the implementation process across various EFL educational settings. Because of their skillful execution, literature circles provide a unique learning environment where students are encouraged to challenge their core beliefs, embrace different points of view, and use their mental energy to produce substantial concepts. Despite contextual constraints, this study concludes with a broad recommendation for EFL instructors and specialists to create tailored approaches that optimize the impact of literature circles. By showing how teaching language and encouraging

critical thinking go hand in hand, its contribution broadens our understanding of cutting-edge EFL teaching techniques.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, English as a Foreign Language, Literary circles, Instructional tool, language competence, Classroom

Introduction

The advancement of EFL education works toward eliminating teaching methods built around memorisation and basic ability training. Contemporary educational approaches prefer critical thinking strategies because these methods let students control language through flexible learning opportunities (Nold, 2017). New curriculum development for EFL learners benefits from collaborative groups based on transformational teaching strategies (Alzubi, Nazim & Ahamad, 2024). This research examines how literature circles affect EFL students' critical thinking development and their progress in acquiring language skills and intellectual development. The study incorporates results from dialogical research using reflection methods to investigate how students learn analytical and evaluation skills. Critical thinking is so vital in the educational setting that no additional proof is needed to support its fundamental nature. College students must develop question-based skills and viewpoint interpretation abilities in the modern world because these are essential survival and educational development features (Raj, Chauhan, Mehrotra & Sharma, 2022).

Critical thinking abilities help students learn English as a second language with language acquisition and cultural awareness, improving their academic performance. The traditional teaching methods in EFL have faced criticism for neglecting student intellectual agency because they primarily focus on grammar practice and vocabulary learning (Alharbi, 2021). Literature circles are an active learning space since they let students function as meaning processors instead of traditional knowledge receivers. Learning groups discussing literary works allow students to move away from language surface targets into the research of interpretation, inference, and reflective spaces (Hossain, 2024).

Literature circles' fundamental nature maintains discussion and teamwork as essential elements. The student group members play each role individually but together create a dialogical exploration of the text by asking questions and summarising and connecting their ideas (Kang & Han, 2019). The multiple components of critical thinking match what Paul and Elder (2006) describe when they explain the fundamental elements of critical thinking, including questioning and reasoning alongside perspective-taking (Angelo, 2025). Hence, EFL students can effectively maintain self-expression within reading groups that offer language support to debate with others and build comprehension abilities despite their restricted language abilities. Understanding and discussing new concepts or lyrical visual representations through a foreign language requires advanced adaptiveness and language proficiency, enabling learners to advance their intellect while mastering the language (Rao, 2024).

Nevertheless, while implementing literature circle methods, educational professionals may face challenges. The success of this teaching technique depends on EFL professionals recognising distinct student interactions that occur in their classrooms amongst students from diverse locations with varying skill levels and cultural backgrounds (Alfares, 2017). Both instructors and educational environments have obstacles in instruction and text delivery techniques despite achieving successful outcomes on advanced literary English competency assessments. Student interactions vary according to cultural background, as individualistic society members tend to debate books that contradict their ideals, whilst collectivist society members avoid arguments (Nilsen & Gustafsson, 2016). These challenges highlight the necessity for teachers to use adaptive ways for guided facilitation of step-by-step tasks and materials that respect cultural settings to benefit from literature circles fully.

The study advances from theory to practical application because it utilises Vygotsky's sociocultural framework and Bloom's taxonomy for critical thinking development as its theoretical foundation. Empirical research combined with theoretical perspectives aims to understand how strategically designed literature circles can elevate the EFL teaching process into a path of intellectual growth. Thus, this academic investigation serves as much as an urgent appeal to transform EFL classroom practices into environments that utilise language to enable students to inquire, create, and reason.

Literature Review

Educators nowadays prioritise critical thinking integration in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms as it supports the broader initiative for generating independent thinkers who achieve linguistic fluency (Zhao, Pandian & Mehar Singh, 2016). Student-led learning through literature circles demonstrates promise to the educational community as an effective technique that builds higher-order thinking abilities during the educational transformation era (Smith & Feng, 2018). It establishes connections between critical thinking in EFL classrooms and research fundamentals by interpreting classroom observations and instructional methods toward future research needs. Critical thinking is multiple analytical, evaluative, inferential, and reflective capabilities that let learners solve complex matters through intentional judgment. It identifies problems with EFL teaching methods that only teach rote memorisation because these approaches do not stimulate intellectual activity (Facione&Facione, 2013).

Student-led literature circles are ideal for EFL instruction because they establish group discussions, enabling students to discover various viewpoints across textual content (Elhess& Egbert, 2015). Literature circles can organise students into autonomous reading discussion groups to improve their interpretation of texts through roles such as discussion director, literary luminary, and vocabulary enrichment. Native English speakers found success in reading comprehension and analytical discourse development through the research methods of Short and Pierce in English-speaking environments (Papastefanou, Marinis& Powell, 2021). Research by Fernanda Espinosa-Cevallos, Susana Cortez-Martínez and Soto (2022) finds that the literature circle approach helps EFL students learn analytical abilities by helping them understand the enactment reasons of the characters and assessing how narratives create meaning. This enables students to think reflectively as they connect their cultural experiences to text content during these discussions, according to the study findings.

The empirical studies indicate that literature circles establish active classroom learning that generates critical thought processes. Karatay (2017) discovered that students who engaged in literature circles displayed superior evaluative reasoning abilities compared to their counterparts in non-circuit classes who studied English as a foreign language. The study identified the

dialogic method of literature circles as the cause of this effect. Literature circle reading activities enhance students' academic performance, self-control, confidence in text interpretation, and social abilities like speaking and engaging in debates. This shows that literature circles' structured, flexible interaction methods help students develop Bloom's (1956) cognitive taxonomy-based analytical abilities, synthetic skills, and evaluative competencies.

English as foreign language instructors who establish literature circles in their classrooms must respond to the implementation problems together with professional criticism. Academic discussions remain out of reach for students with limited language abilities per Paran (2008) due to their comprehension problems stemming from language barriers. These social norms in education trigger students to avoid text or peer-questioning situations. Hence, educational districts face challenges because of healthy financial resources, teacher training deficiencies, and restricted early reading materials, especially in underfunded areas, according to GÜNEŞ (2017). Therefore, various elements demonstrate why flexible solutions must be implemented now for EFL learning environments because text adjustment methods and strategic planning systems enable better learning opportunities.

The research theory framework should employ sociocultural and cognitive paradigms to help EFL students develop academic knowledge through literature circles cooperating with Vygotsky's theoretical constructs. The academic frameworks can work together to construct literature circles that provide an encouraging space that merges speaking activities with cognitive processes while fostering group work opportunities. Research within the EFL domain has not yet focused on this particular aspect to examine the effectiveness of literature circles as critical thinking tools in EFL classrooms, as it lacks solid evidence and information about implementing extended periods of study and classroom implementation strategies. However, existing research does establish how literature circles enable EFL language learners to develop critical thinking abilities through their instructional design.

Research Design

The study followed a secondary research approach by analysing existing studies to examine how literature circles can serve as an educational technique for EFL classrooms to support critical thinking development. This research method best synthesises knowledge from theoretical frameworks, critical studies, and pedagogical reflections because its primary approach lies in synthesis rather than new data collection. The study combined published research to comprehensively describe how literature circles strengthen EFL learners' critical thinking potential, evaluation and reflection skills, and specific classroom advice for educators. The research adopted a qualitative design following interpretive analysis over statistical generalisation while maintaining its dedication to academic rigour and practical application.

Research Objectives and Questions

The research adopts three main goals:

1. To investigate literature circles as tools to promote critical thinking growth in students.
2. To understand the relationship between literature circle structural elements and recognised critical thinking frameworks.
3. To evaluate both the positive aspects and the challenges that stand in the way of adopting literature circles throughout various EFL learning environments.

The research objectives lead to these important research questions.

1. What positive impacts do literature circles with student-led discussions generate for critical thinking capabilities in EFL learners?
2. How do methods of assigning roles, group dialogue, and reflective activities in literature circles function similarly to theoretical principles in critical thinking?
3. How do linguistic and cultural elements in learning environments define the effectiveness of literature circles in EFL contexts?

Data Sources

Research data consists of purposively selected published materials, including peer-reviewed articles published in journals and proceedings from academic conferences from 2010 through 2023. This thirteen-year research period creates an up-to-date and thorough examination of EFL pedagogy developments related to literature circles. The study selects studies that meet the following three criteria:

1. Analysis of literature circles or comparable EFL group reading strategies
2. Relationship between the value of Literature circle strategies and critical thinking and related mental abilities.
3. Research about implementation difficulties across different educational environments.

Academic research databases, including ERIC along with Scopus and Google Scholar, received systematic keyword searches for the terms "literature circles," "critical thinking," "EFL," and "student-centred learning." The review utilised various research types, including theoretical works (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 1994) and empirical tests (Shelton-Strong, 2012; Lin, 2018) with supplementary references from grey literature.

Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection process consisted of two distinctive stages. We started with 60 possible sources discovered through the initial search before applying relevance evaluation based on abstracts and keywords to reduce the list. The original set of 60 possible sources was narrowed to twelve essential works that displayed thorough examination and represented multiple geographical areas, including Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The methodology applied snowball sampling by following citations from selected works to find supplementary research studies. A repetitive research design produced a comprehensive set of sources between foundational works and modern developments to build representative data.

Analytical Approach

Thematic synthesis methodology serves as the analysis framework by Thomas and Harden (2008) to extract patterns between qualitative data sources. This process advances through three distinct sequences of events. The analysis process involved inductive coding, where researchers initially used repeated concepts to develop initial codes, including "role-based collaboration," "perspective-taking," and "cultural resistance."

The analysis process started with the cluster formation of descriptive themes such as "mechanisms of critical thinking enhancement" and "contextual barriers." It developed analytical themes that answered the research questions.

Multiple theoretical models (such as Bloom's taxonomy and sociocultural theory) helped researchers develop a comprehensive understanding of literature circles' strengths and weaknesses in EFL contexts.

Validity and Limitations

The research enhances credibility by using researcher reflexivity to recognise biased choices of sources yet cross-validate findings against different scholarly perspectives within the literature. As a secondary research method, it depends on the available quality and range of existing studies but might omit unpublished materials and studies published in non-English languages. The researcher's reliance on secondary data instead of primary data results in an inability to observe classroom dynamics directly, yet this shortcoming becomes manageable because the study emphasises the analysis of highly comprehensive empirical research.

Significance

The design creates a flexible system that gathers different research strands to give EFL educators research-backed educational strategies and insights. The study uses secondary analysis to develop theoretical knowledge and practical approaches for the field, establishing basic research foundations regarding literature circles as transformative spaces.

Results and Discussion

The study applied thematic synthesis to prior literature to discover substantial findings about literature circles as an educational tool that promotes critical thinking in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The reviewed studies explain three essential results showing how literature circles improve critical thinking abilities and match cognitive developmental theory while influenced by instructional environments. Extensive research from various theoretical and empirical studies proves that literature circles have substantial transformative power, but educators need to handle their unique implementation challenges correctly.

According to the primary research discovery, literature circles function dynamically as critical thinking scaffolds. According to Bedel (2016) and Kucuk (2024), collaborative discussions of literary texts enable EFL students to think analytically by analysing plot elements and characters while interpreting themes. Students who receive role-based assignments as questioners, summarisers, or connectors must challenge ideas while making conclusions, which Facione (2013) classifies as "interpretive" and "evaluative" skills. Using reflective practices through post-discussion journal entries intensifies the instructional outcomes by enabling learners to merge their insights while establishing text-based connections to broader contexts (Hashim & Yusoff, 2021). Through dialogic negotiation, students improve their language competence by becoming meaningful meaning-builders instead of being limited to passive consumption.

Research reveals that literature circles correspond to established principles of critical thinking theory. The organisational approach in literature circles reflects how Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory uses peer interaction within "zones of proximal development" to promote student cognitive growth. The research by Shabani, Khatib and Ebadi (2021) examines EFL learners to show how dialogue groups promote "zones of proximal development" and "reasonable reflective thinking" through perspective development. Therefore, literature circle activities, which lead students from comprehension tasks into evaluation, align with the developmental framework outlined in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy since participants learn to analyse and critique texts in joint sessions. Literature circles function more than language instruction tools because they provide an effective structure for developing sophisticated cognitive abilities that unite linguistic and intellectual learning goals within EFL education (Fernanda Espinosa-Cevallos, Susana Cortez-Martínez & Soto, 2022).

The effectiveness of literature circles depends on contextual variables, representing the third vital discovery. Linguistic competence is a fundamental screening factor when Hossain (2024) shows that students with limited English skills struggle to understand written material and demonstrate analytical thinking, resulting in their marginalisation from meaningful conversation. The student's cultural background creates challenges for implementing literature circles because Alharbi (2021) identifies how students in hierarchical environments tend to avoid challenging discussion topics, which inhibits the goal of developing critical thinking through literature circles. The implementation of literature circles faces barriers from minimal access to educational resources and teacher preparation, primarily affecting understaffed communities (Wen, 2024). Thus, the successful implementation of literature circles demands specific adjustments recognising how each setting functions.

Discussion

According to research results, language-based critical thinking skills develop more effectively when facilitators adequately lead literature clusters in educational settings. The collaborative environment creates a learning space that promotes questioning and reasoning and protects students from passive learning, which traditional EFL educational methods usually deliver, according to Alzubi, Nazim and Ahamad (2024). Research findings suggest that literature circle effects depend on the quality of facilitation and how well they match the learning environment. That means the implications are twofold. The theoretical conclusions of this study improve EFL learning by demonstrating how literature circles combine Vygotskian group activities with Bloomian intellectual talents. School instructors who want to maximise the potential of literature circles should create flexible teaching techniques that combine changeable teacher roles with digital resources. Primary data collected from school contexts should include observational research to address the current limitations of examining secondary data sets. Reading circles are a practical educational approach that helps EFL students improve critical thinking skills. Students use linguistic independence to generate new questions, which helps them grow intellectually and create shared meanings. They illustrate their importance in EFL learning systems through research evaluation, providing precise directions for successful integration.

Recommendations

Secondary study findings confirm that literature circles assist EFL students in developing critical thinking skills under particular educational conditions. Educational professionals and academic scholars should use these proposed teaching approaches, which combine practical implementation models with modern teaching practices. Educational curriculums with progressive progression steps must allow student advancement between competency levels through teacher-led instruction. Basic-level students should begin their discourse development with vocabulary-building assignments and simple texts with conversation questions. The upper-level learners benefit from complex texts and unstructured roles such as the "critical analyst" to enhance their evaluative capabilities. The multimodal instructional method stimulates universal access to learning activities per Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and overcoming the challenges described by Wen (2024). The implementation process needs to be built through cultural responsiveness principles.

The practice of open dialogue combined with teaching materials drawn from familiar cultures helps teachers engage students in hierarchical or collectivist educational contexts. Students who receive training about collaborative norms learn to respect each other as they learn to give and receive constructive criticism, eventually transforming their reticence into active inquiry to reflect better and take different perspectives. Hostile resources generate a strong demand for innovative problem-solving approaches. When resources are scarce, teachers can enhance their educational materials with digital e-books, open-access literature, and peer-based educational development to compensate for limited funding provisions (Alzubi, Nazim and Ahamad, 2024). Educational collaborations between teachers could help distribute best practices through networks to increase educators' opportunities for applying practical standards. Longitudinal primary research must be conducted across various EFL environments with investigations into teacher-led facilitation practices and student motivational factors. Research assessments should further develop theoretical connections between literature circles and critical thinking by providing specific information on their lasting educational outcomes.

Conclusion

A collection of scholarly studies illustrates how literature circles function as an academic approach to enhancing critical thinking skills in EFL classes. Using literature circles as an EFL teaching approach, students can find intellectual knowledge dimensions while graduating from standard language training through role-based exploration, reflective practice, and collaborative discourse. Because the learning strategy converts language competencies into investigation-oriented intellectual engagement, students can develop analytical skills while obtaining reflective comprehension and evaluative thinking abilities through proper application. Literature circles connect advanced cognitive processes and EFL language acquisition by combining Bloom's cognitive development (1956) and Vygotsky's sociocultural framework (1978).

The method does exist, but several important factors need to be considered. The way literature circles produce fruitful outcomes is determined by literacy skills, cultural predispositions, and classroom resources; these can be maintained through adaptable implementation procedures. Teachers need to adapt their facilitating strategies to the various learning environments seen in EFL courses. The study contributes significantly to the expanding body of research on how EFL instruction promotes student agency by proving unequivocally that critical thinking should be prioritised in language learning programs to develop intellectual capacity. Because literature circles show how EFL-proficient students utilise literature to confront and transform their reality, they unequivocally prove that literature transcends its function as a tool for language training.

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