

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON ESL STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF A GRAPHIC NOVEL

Ho Lai Ying
Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan Nan Hwa
janicehly78@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of implementing literature circles to assist a group of ESL students to comprehend a graphic novel. Data were gathered from direct observation, interviews and transcripts of literature circles. The data obtained from the direct observation showed that the students participated actively in literature circles to comprehend the graphic novel. Besides, the data gathered from the transcripts of literature circles revealed that the students connected their responses with their personal values and experiences. Data collected from the transcripts of literature circles showed that the students made interpretations when they discussed the illustrations in the graphic novel. To gather data on the students' perceptions of literature circles, evidence from the interviews showed that literature circles enhanced the students' interaction, motivation and responsibility. Students also had the opportunities to share their personal responses in literature circles and this improved their comprehension of the story. These findings suggest teachers to implement literature circles to teach literature in ESL classroom for students to achieve comprehension.

Keywords: literature circles, graphic novel, comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Implementing literature circles in the classroom has gained much consideration in researches for the past decades (Kim, 2004; Clarke, 2007; Fredricks, 2012). Literature circles promote growth in numerous academic competencies and social outcomes such as cooperative learning, positive interdependence, group accountability and processing (Kummert, 2014). Literature circles are defined as small and temporary discussion groups which have been chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book. In literature circles, the group members determine the portion of the text either inside or outside of the class, prepare to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion and come to the group with the notes needed to help perform that job. The members also have regular meetings with discussion roles rotating each session and they share highlights of their reading with the wider community, trade members with other finishing groups, select more reading and move into a new cycle (Daniels, 1994).

In the context of the present study, Gurnam Kaur and Chan (2010) mention that co-operative and collaborative learning are given little emphasis in the teaching of literature in Malaysian classroom. Studying literature in Malaysian classroom is also unpopular as teachers do not implement interesting teaching methods to teach literature (Kiran Kaur & Surita, 2014). For these reasons, literature circles are suggested to assist a group of second language students to comprehend a graphic novel. Previous studies (Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 2000; Shelton-Strong, 2012) show that literature circles provide opportunities for students to talk about books regardless of their reading levels or language proficiency. Although, implementing literature circles are well known in English language teaching and learning context, the implementation of this instructional method in English as a second language (ESL) secondary school classroom remains under-explored. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore the effectiveness of literature circles to assist a group of ESL students to comprehend a graphic novel and their views of literature circles.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To determine the effectiveness of literature circles on the ESL students' comprehension, the following research questions were developed:

- a) How effective are literature circles in assisting the ESL students to comprehend a graphic novel?
- b) What are the students' views on literature circles?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises on the role of sharing knowledge and constructing understanding in learning (Maloch, 2002). In this theory, the child's social interaction is stressed and thought can be socially shared (Walqui, 2006). Vygotsky stressed that social interaction is the basic of learning and it precedes the development of knowledge and ability. The development of the students' knowledge and understanding are developed by their interactions with others especially with peers and adults. Teacher not only scaffolds students to understand and complete a particular task but also acts as a discourse facilitator to involve the students in exploratory talk (Maloch, 2002). Teachers should also not scaffold the students until they have no chance to progress themselves but they should provide sufficient scaffolding so that the student will not give up on the task (Clark & Graves, 2004). Besides the role of teachers, adults and peers can also help the children in learning as they bring the child's knowledge to a higher level by involving in the Zone of Proximal Development (Muijs & Reynolds, 2005).

This present study was related to sociocultural theory as the students' comprehension of the texts were enhanced through social interaction with peers in literature circles. The students supported one another during the discussions as they had the opportunities to discuss about the story, listen to their group members' responses and evaluate the story by making different interpretations based on their understanding of the story. Before the students engaged in the discussions, the researcher demonstrated to the students on how literature circles were conducted and provided some information about the story. When the students engaged in literature circles, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) occurred as the students were guided by the teacher as facilitator, led by the group discussion leaders to express their responses and assisted by the group members in evaluating the text.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and the Participants

This study was carried out in a Chinese medium school in Perak. Purposive sampling of six upper secondary form four students were selected to be the participants. The students were average learners based on their PT3 assessment results. PT3 or Form Three Assessment is a school-based assessment which students are assessed via written and oral tests as well as assignments, projects, practical tests and case studies. When the study was carried out, the participants were referred as Janez, Li Sheng, Jin Sheng, Pei Li, Le Ying and Jia Jin. These are not their real names.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the students engaged in four literature circles and data were collected on a weekly basis for two months. The study started in the middle of January and continued until the middle of March. When the students engaged in literature circles, they were assigned roles to perform during the discussions. The roles were group discussion leader, passage master, vocabulary enricher, summariser, connector and travel tracer. The students performed different roles in each literature circle and they were given role sheets to guide them in carrying out their duties. To answer the research questions, data were collected from direct observation, interviews and transcripts of literature circles. To analyse the data obtained, the researcher examined the

transcripts, applied initial codes, identified themes and descriptions and made interpretations of the themes and descriptions. The multi levels of data analysis by Creswell (2009) was adapted and applied in data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were explained based on the research questions. The results were examined along with the excerpts from the transcripts of literature circles.

Research question 1

How effective are literature circles in assisting the ESL students to comprehend a graphic novel?

To answer research question one, data were collected from direct observation, interviews and transcripts of literature circles. Three main themes were identified as they reflected the effectiveness of literature circles in assisting the students to comprehend the story in a graphic novel. The themes were students became active participants, made personal connections and interpretations in literature circles.

Students became active participants in literature circles.

Helgeson (2017) states that literature circles assist the students for deeper and higher reading comprehension. In literature circles, the students are actively seeking for knowledge, performing the assigned roles and involving in collaborative discussions which facilitate them for deeper comprehension and construction of new knowledge (Whittingham, 2014). On the other hand, graphic novels assist students in comprehension (Lyga, 2006; Ranker, 2007). Pantaleo and Bomphray (2011) point out that the most frequently mentioned benefit of using graphic novels in classrooms focuses on how the visual nature of the texts enhances comprehension. Jennings, Rule and Zanden (2014) highlight that students' conversations and engagement in the text are increased in literature circles when graphic novels are included in the discussions.

In this study, the data obtained from the direct observation revealed that the students participated actively in literature circles to comprehend the graphic novel. The data showed that they discussed a lot of attractive and colourful illustrations in the graphic novel during literature circles. The data from the direct observation also stated that the students showed enthusiasms when they discussed the graphic novel in literature circles. Except 1 shows that the students discussed a statement mentioned by the main character, Amir to his bride, Soraya. The group members contributed their opinions by giving their own personal responses based on their understanding of the story.

Excerpt 1

Pei Li : Li Sheng opinion is correct I think that . A truly good doctor wouldn't mind with his patient are from which country or even from different classes...treat them with good care and concern them. Ok. Let jump to another question. Ok...which of the drawing in the novel that leave a big impact in your mind?

Le Ying : Err....

Janez : Page 88 that Amir told Soraya that I see the rest of my life. That one.

Pei Li : Ok...let have on it.

Jia Jin : (Laughs) Yeh...

Pei Li : (Laughs) Amir had mentioned when he saw their face on the mirror. I see the rest of my life. What do you guys think about this statement?

Le Ying : For me it is not just a point of view or just a sentence. I think that when Amir said that I see the rest of my life it means a promise about to Soraya that he loves her, cares for her and willing to use his whole life to cherish her. To protect her and be a good husband...is about to her that he would take care of her and would never betray her or left her alone. Yes that.

Pei Li : Jin Sheng, what do you think about Amir said I see the rest of my life in the mirror?

Jin Sheng: I think he...Amir said this sentence...he was wondering about his future of his life. He looked through the mirror and see his wife and he is wondering er...they have a kid. Just like the picture beside there. Three people standing there.

Students made personal connections in literature circles.

According to Kim (2004), when the students were discussing about the reading text, they would usually connect it to their values and experiences in lives. They would share their personal stories in the discussion if the text or discussion encourages personal contributions. Kim (2004) mentioned in her study that the personal connections made by her students assisted them to respond to the text meaningfully and they would immerse completely with the text. In this study, it was found that the students made personal connections based on their own values, beliefs and experiences in lives when they engaged in literature circles. Data were identified through the transcripts of literature circles and the researcher's observation when the literature circles were conducted. Excerpt 2 shows an interesting topic of discussion when the students discussed the issue of marriage of the main character, Amir.

Excerpt 2

Janez : I would like to ask if you were Amir's father, would you allow Amir to marry a lady like that...like Soraya.

Li Sheng: It all depends on that person. In the 70s and 80s, people are not open-minded. They are a bit old timer...old school. If you think more, if you are a person in 90s and 80s, maybe they will reject. But now, if you think as a young man, I mean in...in the 21st century, maybe he will accept.

Le Ying : (Laughs)

Janez : You...you would accept?

Li Sheng: I think that if she really loves me and I really love her then maybe I will.

Janez : Thank you. Then if you are Amir's father.

Li Sheng: I think I have to respect my son decision.

Janez : Ok...Jia Jin, how about you?

Jia Jin : Don't know what to say.

Janez : Jin Sheng?

Jin Sheng: (Quiet)

Le Ying : I think we all agree with what he said.

Janez : Ok but if I am Amir's father, I will not agree with my son because this girl is not so like healthy.

Jia Jin : (Teases Janez)

Janez : Maybe...maybe if we have our child then our child grown up already. She will also be like her mother maybe lar so to prevent this happen. I will not let my son to marry her.

The evidence in excerpt 2 shows that Li Sheng had different opinion about the topic of marriage compared to Janez. Li Sheng, an open-minded person, mentioned that he would marry the lady he loved no matter what circumstances happened to her. He would also allow his son to do so if he was the father of the main character. On the other hand, Janez, a more conservative person, didn't agree with Li Sheng's opinion. He has his own principles and values as he was brought up in a strict family. He mentioned that he would not allow his son to marry a sick lady as it might affect his next generation. Both of the students expressed different opinions based on their personal beliefs and experiences in lives. There were plenty of support in the data that showed the students made personal connections based on their own experiences and values. Ballenger (1997) states that making connection with what is discussed and connecting it with personal experiences help to enhance comprehension and retention among the students. Kim (2004) adds that the process of making personal connection gives opportunity for the students in language learning to express their own opinion and thinking in the target language. Excerpt 3 shows the students' discussion using English language and Mandarin in a literature circle.

Excerpt 3

Jia Jin : The next question? Ok...the next question is if you were Shorab, what will you feel when you know that you have to stay at the orphanage again and what will be your action? Will you commit suicide?

Janez : I will not commit suicide and I will run away.

Le Ying. : (Laughs)

Janez : Then...

Jia Jin : Surprise to know that.

Janez : No. I think most of us will do that. Err...me ah...still young. Don't know what to do. No one had taught me and no one had teach me how to do...how to face this problem... where I need to go... so...so I just run ah...run away, run as far as possible.

Pei Li : If I am Shorab...I will not do as what Janez said...run away. If I run away...don't know where to run and what to do. You can see that in Afghanistan, everywhere is war,

Talibans full of tough and hardship. Shorab is only 10 years old or more than 10 years old. He can't face this problem alone.

Le Ying. : He cannot survive alone (Interrupts)

Pei Li : I will stay and try to talk with Amir and maybe let him to talk with the...What we call that ah?People who do the visa and discuss with them if I have the chance to ...don't just let me stay in the orphanage.Maybe can put me in a place where I can do some work ... so that I can become independent...don't need to depend on other people.

[Translated from Mandarin]

Jia Jin : Ok...that is a possible answer. Err...Jin Sheng, I haven't hear your sound. Could you please say something about it?

Li Sheng: Err...I agree with Pei Li's opinion. She said that he should be independent.

Do you think that Shorab is still very young?[Translated from Mandarin.]

As previously explained, the students are a group of average English language learners in a secondary school. It was expected that they would encounter problem in discussing the reading text using English language and they would use Mandarin in the discussions. The data from the direct observation showed that the students tried to give their personal responses using English language. The researcher also noticed that the students helped one another when they encountered problem in finding appropriate words in English language to express their personal responses during the discussions. The data on the direct observation described that the students were enthusiastic in expressing their opinions about the issues happened in the story when they were in literature circles.

Students made interpretations of the story.

In literature circles, the students are given the opportunity to express their opinions, ideas and interpretations about the topics or questions discussed. Rosenblatt (1995) states that the same text has different meaning and value to us at different times or circumstances. Rosenblatt explains that the reader must have understanding of the text in order to make predictions that is important or special to his experience. Kim (2004) adds that sometimes the readers would venture beyond the literal meaning of the text to search for deeper or hidden meaning in the text. Kim further describes that the students predict about what is going to happen, apply their imagination and construct explanation of why an event takes place. Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) mention that readers make predictions and they modify them based on continued interpretations of the text. Certo et al. (2010) explain that good readers would use their understandings or interpretations of the text to make predictions and they continually adjust their predictions based on the continued interpretations of the text.

In this study, the transcripts of literature circles revealed that the students discussed their interpretations of the characters or events in the story when they gathered in literature circles. They predicted what was going to happen and made assumptions about why a certain event happened in the story. The data from the direct observation showed that the students were actively engaged when they discussed their predictions with the group members. To show that the students agreed with their group members' ideas, the researcher noticed that the students nodded and praised their group members after they had presented their opinions. The students also listened attentively when the group members responded to the questions discussed.

Latendresse (2004) states that the students make personal connections in their lives, respond relevantly, learn to interpret and allow interpretation to develop when they are in literature circles. Rosenblatt (1994) explains that each reader interprets the text not only based on the past life, literary history and repertory of internalised codes but also his or her active present which includes preoccupations, anxieties, questions and aspirations in achieving the interpretations. The following excerpt 4 illustrates the students' discussion about the character, Baba in the story.

Excerpt 4

Pei Li : Ok.Thank you. You guys did a great job. Following next I would like to ask some questions about the story. First of all, please turn to page 78. Ok.What do you think about

Baba's feeling when he knows that the doctor who gave him treatment was a Russian?

Le Ying : I think Baba will feel very angry and I can understand why he wouldn't let him treat him

because Afghanistan was invaded by Russian and Russian treated Afghan people very

bad so when he met the doctor who is an Russian, he was very angry at him and see him

as one of the Russian soldiers who invaded his country.

Janez : Emm...

Pei Li : Totally agree. Do you guys have other opinion or suggestions?

Li Sheng: Actually it depends on the point of view.

Le Ying : (Laughs)

Li Sheng: Ok...point of view. As a doctor, he should...I mean treat our patient whether he is your enemy, your family or even stranger. I mean as a doctor. It is his responsibility. I mean to take a very good care of the patient and actually the doctor is nothing wrong with him.It is just Baba perception to the doctor. This is just my opinion.

Pei Li : Li Sheng opinion is correct I think that . A truly good doctor wouldn't mind with his patient are from which country or even from different classes.Treat them with good care and concern them.

In excerpt 4, the group discussion leader, Pei Li asked the group members about Baba's feeling when he knew that the doctor who treated him was a Russian. One of the students, Le Ying mentioned that Baba was very angry because his beloved country was invaded by the Russian and they treated the Afghans badly. Another student, Li Sheng added that it was only Baba's negative thinking and perception about the doctor. He then explained that the doctor just wanted to help his patient and nothing was wrong about him. His opinion was then supported by the group discussion leader as she also believed that a doctor should carry out his or her responsibility to care and concern about the patients. This excerpt shows that students actively made interpretations based on the pictures found in graphic novel when they engaged in literature circles.

Research Question 2

What are the students' views on the literature circles?

Three themes were identified as they reflected the students' views on literature circles. The themes were literature circles enhanced students' interaction, motivation and responsibility, encouraged students' personal responses and improved students' comprehension of the story.

Literature circles enhanced students' interaction, motivation and responsibility.

The data obtained from the interviews and direct observation showed that the students enjoyed taking part in literature circles. Besides seeing the students participated actively in literature circles, the data from the direct observation revealed that the students laughed and teased one another during the discussions. Kim (2004) mentioned in her study that laughter and smiling in the classes indicated that the students enjoyed the discussions. The data obtained from the direct observation also showed that the students were excited in discussing the story even though some of them communicated in broken English language and used Mandarin during the discussions.

According to Burns (1998), the key component of the success of a literature circle is the social interaction that happened during the discussion. Burns adds that the students are able to verbalise the content and listen to other's thinking and perspectives which contribute to comprehension. Latendresse (2004) states that by allowing the students to read the text at their own reading level and schedule, they are able to achieve success and self-esteem. Excerpt 5 shows the students' responses in the interview.

Excerpt 5

Le Ying : I like the feeling of a bunch of people reading the same book and discuss about and telling each other what they like and dislike and like giving suggestions about an idea. I find it very interesting. I personally prefer to read novel so I share something that I like with my friends. That is something that makes me happy.

Janez : I think that it is very good that everyone can get different idea and opinion so that we can share with others and it is not written in the novel.

Li Sheng : Actually literature circle is an enjoyable way to read and at the same time, we can improve our language.

Pei Li : In these few days, I enjoyed myself in the literature circle with my group members. They helped me a lot in understanding more about the story.

In this study, the researcher observed the students' participation in literature circles and the data showed that the students were motivated and they preferred to work in group. They were delighted when they managed to carry out literature circles successfully. Burns (1998) states that students enjoy working in the relaxed atmosphere of the book club as they are encouraged for the discussion. Burns further explains that smaller group discussion gives more opportunity for active involvement which brings changes to the classroom climate.

In this study, data from the interviews showed evidence that literature circles helped the students to learn the value of responsibility. The information gained from the direct observation also revealed that the students completed the role sheets before literature circles began. The researcher found that the students were busy reading the text before they gathered for the discussions. The data from the direct observation showed that the group discussion leaders brainstormed questions and the students wrote the questions on

the notebooks. Some students were busy constructing questions and looking for interesting topics in the story that they could discuss in literature circles. Excerpt 6 shows the student's feeling when she gathered in literature circles.

Excerpt 6

Researcher: How do you feel when you involved in the literature circles?

Pei Li : Very excited

Researcher: Could you please explain?

Pei Li : Everyone cooperate to do the job well. To let the literature circle successful, they have tried their best to complete the discussion.

Literature circles encouraged students to share personal responses of the story.

In the interviews conducted with the students, the data showed that literature circle is an interesting method in discussing and sharing ideas of the story in the graphic novel. The students claimed that literature circles are medium for them to share their opinions on what they have read and understood about the story in the graphic novel. Mohamed Elhess and Egbert (2015) state that students are more willing to share their opinions and feel comfortable to work with their peers in literature circles rather than being monitored or corrected by the teachers. Widodo (2016) mentions that discussion happens in literature circles as students are allowed to create ideas and ask questions. In literature circles, students are allowed for high level of interaction and this provides them the opportunity to talk with each other about literature (Helgeson, 2017). Excerpt 7 shows some responses mentioned by the students regarding literature circles.

Excerpt 7

Pei Li : It is an interesting session for people to discuss about their opinions and thoughts. We can exchange about our thinking of the story and let us to know more about the story.

In literature circle, all the students can freely talk about their opinions. We can talk what we have in our mind during the discussion so that other people know what we are thinking about.

Le Ying : I think literature circle allows a lot of people to read in group and inspires those who don't love reading to love reading.

Janez : I think it is a great chance to let others to learn to have chance to present their opinion and what they have read in the novel and share to others.

Jin Sheng : I think literature circle help me be responsible in carry out my duty to complete the role so that we can discuss in literature circle.

Jia Jin : I think this literature circle helps us to see things that we cannot find while reading. We can see different things from different people.

Soraya Ali (1993) states that sharing responses in literature circles help the students to broaden their perspectives and enhance the students' understanding of the text. In this study, it was interesting to find out that the data in the interviews revealed that literature circles motivated students who seldom read novels.

One of the students in this study stated that he actually rarely read English novel. When he involved in literature circles, he had to read the graphic novel as he needed to complete the tasks given to him before the discussions began. Burns (1998) states that literature circles motivate the reluctant readers by allowing them to make their own decision during the discussion and giving them the feelings of controlling over their own learning. The following excerpt 8 shows some responses mentioned by the students about literature circles.

Excerpt 8

Le Ying : I think it is very meaningful. We can share with other people the happiness of reading the book. Can also share many things about the book and also influence many people to love reading. Literature circle allows a lot of people to read in group and inspires those who don't love reading to love reading.

Jin Sheng : I seldom read the English novel. When I take part in this literature circle, I read the graphic novel because I need to complete my assignment.

Literature circles improved students' comprehension of the story.

The data from the interviews and transcripts of literature circles showed that literature circles aided the students in comprehension. According to Burns (1998), the ability to discuss the content and listen to opinions and responses contribute to comprehension in literature circles. Mohamed Elhess and Egbert (2015) state that literature circles assist students to develop comprehension skills as students draw detailed evidence from the text to support their ideas, emphasise main ideas and answer critically to what they have read from the text. In this study, evidence from the direct observation showed that the students comprehended the story in the graphic novel by discussing the story with the group members, listening to the group members' ideas and sharing their own personal responses in literature circles. Excerpt 9 displays the students' responses of gathering in literature circles.

Excerpt 9

Li Sheng: It is a way to help us to understand the story in an enjoyable method. When we read the story maybe just roughly we understand about 80% but once we carry out the discussion, certain part that we miss it or didn't bother the minor part for example and we can think about it. Because from this literature circle, we understand the story in a very special way. I can say as a unique way because all of us sit together and share our experience to others.

Le Ying : Sometimes when we are listening to others people discussion and their point of view. We also think a lot and finally agree with them and find out that I never thought of it.

CONCLUSION

In literature circles, all the group members play significant roles to ensure smooth discussions in evaluating and discussing the text. Ragland and Palace (2017) state that literature circles help motivating students in discussing the text, becoming active students to search for meaning, improving students' comprehension and communication skills effectively. The findings of this study reveal the effectiveness of literature circles in assisting a group of ESL students to comprehend a graphic novel. Literature circles assist the students to become active participants to discuss the graphic novel, allow students to make personal connections based on the students' values and experiences and encourage students to make interpretations of the characters or events in the story. The evidence obtained from the interviews also shows positive comments from the students about literature circles. Literature circles enhance students' interaction, motivation and responsibility. When students engage in literature circles, they share their personal responses and this improves their comprehension of the story. Lastly, implementing literature circles in ESL classroom not only helps to improve students' comprehension but also engages students to make meaning of the text in an enjoyable way of learning.

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