

LATIP 2021**International Conference on Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm****READING CIRCLES IMPACT ON ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE STUDENTS' MOTIVATION**

Alena Vasilevna Bozhkova (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) Altai State Pedagogical University, 656 031 Molodezhaya Street, Barmaul, Russia, bozhkova_av@altspu.ru

Abstract

This study focused on the impact reading circles method had on university students' motivation learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This paper explores how reading circles method was used in the EFL lessons. In order to analyze the students' responses to the activity, 2 questionnaires were designed. In the first questionnaire, the students reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of the lessons where the studied method was used and presented their experience, observations, and concerns. After having discussed the students' views and responses to reading circles in the questionnaire with open questions, the results of the scaled questions directly related to students' motivation presented in the second questionnaire were analyzed. The whole-group average value of each item was calculated and the results were shown and described in the paper. According to the results, the students responded positively to the activity. It is significant that they assigned very high values to the items connected with their involvement into the discussion process. Based on the result of data analysis, it is concluded that the use of reading circles has a positive impact on the students' motivation and their involvement into the discussion process. The students who experience reading circles tend to be deeply involved into the study process. The author found that the lessons organized with the reading circles method resulted in an increase in students' independence and autonomy, and their increased engagement and social interaction between them.

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1. Introduction

A typical interactional classroom situation is when students are fully involved into the learning process and actively participate in the lesson. Students' participation is believed to be more genuine if they are productive rather than receptive. To motivate students, educators should use various practical techniques and tools to make materials and tasks more interactive and more learner-focused, encouraging students to be more responsible for their own learning.

One of the techniques that can illuminate psychological barriers in speaking process and give students the opportunity to try different roles is a reading circles method. They have a chance to experience different roles and exchange them from one lesson to the other. This method has also another name literature circles. In this paper, the name reading circles is used because it better reflects the essence of the studied method and because a modified version of it is used.

Reading circles method increases social interaction between students. They learn from each other through various discussions and tasks. Different from the traditional methods, reading circles promote independent thought and enthusiasm growth among students. This method provides students with an environment similar to the real life in which they can handle the responsibilities of discussing the book, inventing many activities, interpreting situations described in the book from different perspectives. In the present research paper, this method is described with the help of the book *Snow Garden* by Rachel Joyce. This book contains the following short stories: *A Faraway Smell of Lemon*, *The Marriage Manual*, *Christmas Day at the Airport*, *The Boxing Day Ball*, *A Snow Garden*, *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, and *Trees*. All the given stories are interconnected. The discussion of short stories in the form of reading circles is an excellent way to challenge and involve students in reading discussion. Short stories are fun and they have situations that students may identify with their lives.

An educator can organize lessons using reading circles method twice a month. Students prepare their roles, study carefully some background information about the book and its author. There are different versions of the reading circles model and the number of participants can vary in its other versions. The given model divides the whole class into several small groups. The analyzed version contains six specific roles that replicate the whole reading process, exploring different elements of the book and contributing to a more active discussion:

- Discussion Leader;
- Summarizer;
- Connector;
- Culture Connector;
- Research Master;
- Word Master.

Discussion Leader is responsible for making up general questions about the story (some important information about characters, theme, etc.). *Summarizer*, in their turn, is concerned with reading of the discussed story and making notes about its characters, events, and ideas, finding some key points and summarizing the story in their own words (no more than two minutes). *Connector* is involved into drawing some parallels between the story and the world outside. It is advisable that one should make

connections based on their own experience or the experience of their friends, acquaintances and family. *Culture Collector* looks for both differences and similarities between their own culture and the culture presented in the story. The person concerned with this role works with two or three passages that reflect these cultural peculiarities, asks the class some questions about the mentioned things. *Research Master* looks for some background information on the topic related to the story. This information may concern the following: geography, setting, the author, time described in the story, etc. *Word Master*, as a rule, chooses words that are important to the story and are often repeated or used in an unusual way. Word Master should explain the meanings of these words (up to 6 words can be taken) in simple English to the class. It is necessary to explain the class why these words are important for understanding the story. It is recommended that one should elicit these words from the rest of the class. Elicitation is a very good teaching technique and a way to many other activities where students can develop their critical thinking (Ngeow & Kong, 2003).

An educator should make sure that every participant has a chance to speak and join the organized discussion. While educators monitor the discussion process, they may circulate and occasionally scaffold students, students themselves negotiate with one another to determine who gets the floor and what topics will be included into discussion (Almasi et al., 2001). It is recommended that educators should clarify and explicitly teach skills and concepts when necessary, activate students' background knowledge and respond to them in such a way as to promote extended speech and be a guide and not a leader in the class discussion.

2. Problem Statement

One of the most important ways to promote an effective language-learning environment is to enable students to do most of the talking in the lesson. Walsh (2002), in his turn, stresses that in many classrooms of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) it is the teacher who does most of the talking in the lesson leaving fewer opportunities to students to talk and most of the time they remain silent that is one of the serious obstacles to the development of communicative competence in them. Almasi et al. (2001) and her colleagues in their research conclude that in reading discussions where the teacher's role was substantial, students did not have an opportunity to learn how to manage their own conversations. McMahon (1997) maintains that if educators tightly control such kind of discussions, students will not be given all the linguistic benefits of peer discourse, and the former will not get sufficient opportunities to simply listen to their students and analyze their speaking skills. It is believed that on average, Students Speaking Time (SST) should be approximately 70% while Teachers Speaking Time (TST) should be approximately equal to 30% as shown in Figure 01.



Figure 1. Students-oriented lesson

Celani et al. (2006) and her colleagues stress a few ineffective instructional strategies and a necessary shift away from these approaches, "...focus on moving beyond traditional classroom discourse in which the teacher does most of the talking, is the only one to respond to students, and does all of the questioning" (p. 100). The IRE (initiation-response-evaluation) pattern of interaction in many situations delegates students to more passive and reactive roles in discussions (Maloch, 2004, p. 1).

Many educators have difficulties selecting an effective method that encourages and motivates students to read and respond critically to reading materials used in the EFL classroom. An effective method should enable students to think on their own without their teacher's total guidance. Despite the fact that some methods are effective, many of them unfortunately do not challenge students to participate actively in group reading discussions.

Reading circles is a good tool that helps make students more active and motivated; this method is student-centered. During the analyzed discussions, students are engaged in active speaking practice. They are involved into the discussion process with their peers.

Ketch (2005) points out the use of reading circles is one of the methods to create classroom conversations. The scholar stresses that these conversations are a critical part of learning; students learn not only the information described in the text, they learn the world around them, and cultural background of the discussed context. Routman (2000) supports the mentioned idea and states, "All learning involves conversation" (p. 36). The conversations allow students to take ownership of the learning process itself (Gallavan & Kottler, 2002; Ketch, 2005; McCall 2010). In social studies classrooms, reading circles encourage authentic student-led discussions and interactions rather than mainly teacher-centered, question-and-answer exchanges. When students are given the opportunity to take on leadership roles in small group discussions, they are taking ownership in their own learning (O'Brian, 2007; McCall, 2010, p. 153). This ownership might make students be more motivated to read assigned material and participate more actively in the discussions.

Another important thing is that students are afraid to speak in the lesson. They have a lot to say but, metaphorically speaking, they "bottle everything up", not sharing their thoughts or emotions with their peers or educators. In literature lesson, educators should create the necessary atmosphere that can help students feel more relaxed and speak freely and with great enthusiasm on different topics. Most of the existing research does not primarily consider students' involvement into the discussion process based

on social roles swapping where they “can put on different masks”. One way to handle these objectives is to organize a study process in such a way so that students will be fully engaged in the lesson.

3. Research Questions

We suggested that use of reading circles method primarily directed at eliminating the distance between an educator and students enables students to speak freely and with high enthusiasm in modern EFL lessons, sharing their thoughts and emotions with their peers that in its turn contributes to their communicative competence development.

Thus, the research question for the study was: does the use of reading circles in literature classroom motivate students to be more enthusiastic in the group discussion?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if the use of reading circles in a university classroom would motivate students to be better engaged in the discussion process. This paper concerns Russian students of higher educational institutions majoring in English and methods of teaching English as a foreign language, and Translation and Intercultural Communication in Linguistic Institute of Altai State Pedagogical University. This research is designed to study how the reading circles method contributes to students’ engagement in the learning process.

5. Research Methods

The fundamental ideas of qualitative methods in teaching aimed at assessing the efficiency of the proposed teaching method constituted the methodological platform of the present research paper. The use of the enumerated methods contributes to the development of teaching strategies of EFL lesson. The research done in the proposed format gives a chance to describe teaching strategies and motivation development in students.

6. Findings

Participants in the study, which was conducted during 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years, were the students of English Intermediate, majoring in English and Teaching English as a foreign language, and Translation and Intercultural Communication at the Linguistic Institute of Altai State Pedagogical University. The overall number of students who participated in the research was 26 in 2019/20 and 27 - in 2020/21. The students exposed to the questionnaire were in the same age group of 17 – 19 years old.

For the present study, an anonymous short questionnaire was designed and first piloted on a group of 10 students at the end of 2018/19 academic year. It enabled me to enhance clarity of some questions presented in the questionnaire. After this experiment, the questionnaire was modified, the questions were elaborated and its drawbacks were eliminated. The modified version of questionnaire included open questions asking the participants to comment on the lesson conducted in the form of reading circles, e.g. whether this method stimulated the class to speak in the lesson overcoming psychological barriers, and

whether they had enough time to speak in the lesson and express all their thoughts and ideas, whether the lesson was interesting or boring, etc. The students who were respondents gave feedback on the effectiveness of the studied teaching method. As the questionnaire contained only broad open questions, it allowed the class to present their experience, observations, and concerns.

The students in Intermediate groups were asked to fill in the questionnaire in 2018/19 and 2019/20 academic years. Numerous comments of the participants in the questionnaires were considered in this study, and the qualitative analysis of their feedback is presented in this paper. Some of the students' comments and responses were reproduced exactly as they were written, some of them were slightly modified. The comments received from participants showed that 85% of respondents in 2019/20 and 93% of respondents in 2020/21 found the reading circles method very beneficial. Respondents of both academic years thought that this activity was "extremely", "definitely" or "very" useful. They had more time to collect their thoughts they wanted to share with the whole class. Nobody was left behind and all the class was involved into this activity. The students became more motivated to express their opinions. This method encourages more active discussions. Some of them stressed that this method helped them "be brave and overcome stress to speak". "It is interesting and motivating to try different roles". It better involved them into the lesson. It made them discuss different sides of the story and interact more with their peers. Almost 85% of students in 2019/20 and 88% - in 2020/21 reported that the studied method allowed them to improve their speaking skills and stimulated them to actively participate in the discussion of the book, looking for extra information motivated them to conduct research in the sphere. I may conclude that such atmosphere enhances students' confidence in their communicative competence and establishes a positive and relaxed classroom climate.

After having discussed the students' views and responses to reading circles in the questionnaire with open questions, it is necessary to analyze the results of the scaled questions directly related to students' motivation. These questions were included in the second questionnaire that was designed for the same classes of students of 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years.

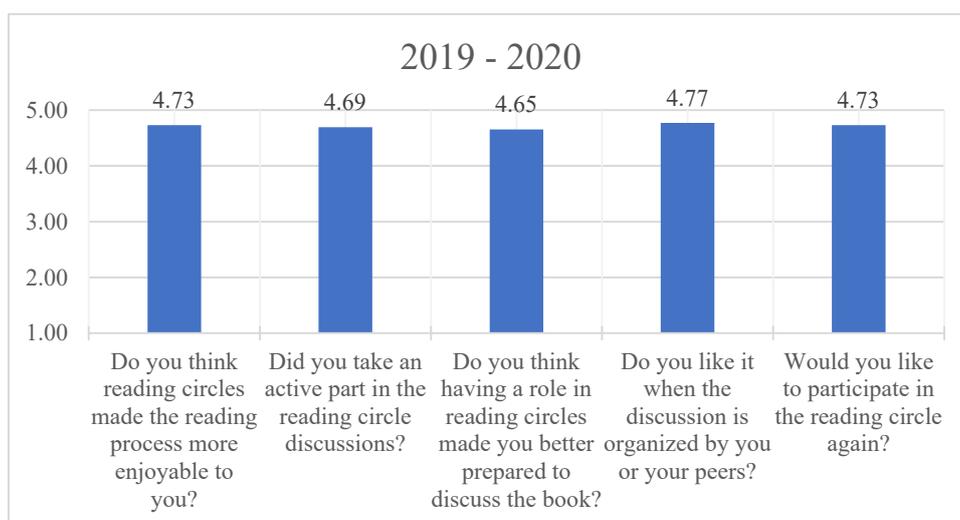


Figure 2. Questions about attitude to reading circles method: average results, 2019-2020 academic year

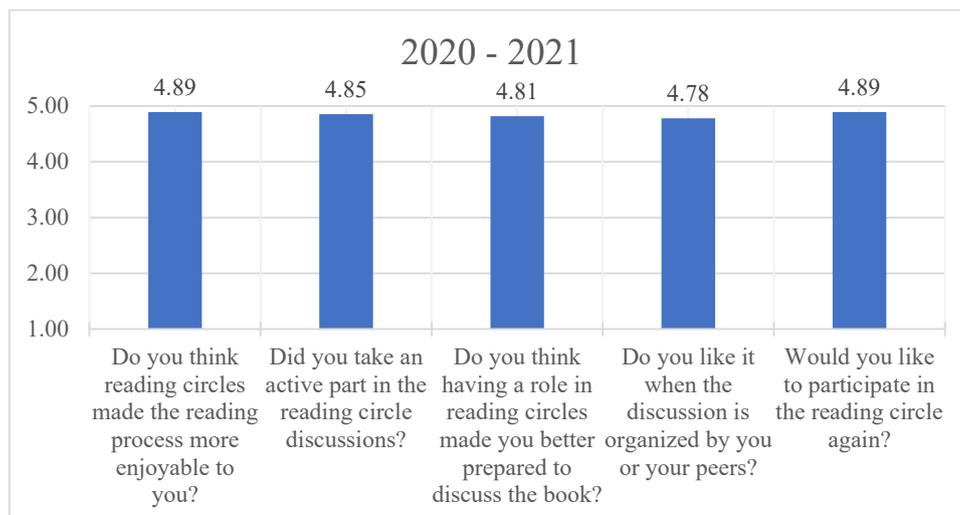


Figure 3. Questions about attitude to reading circles method: average results, 2020-2021 academic year

Figures from 1 to 5 stand for 5) very much 4) pretty much 3) kind of 2) not really 1) not at all. The whole-group average value of each item was calculated and the results are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

It is significant that the students assigned very high values to the items connected with their involvement into the discussion process (1, 2). Since the average value is over 4 (4.73 and 4.76) in 2019-2020 academic year and 4.89, 4.85 in 2020-2021 academic year respectively, the students seem to feel rather enthusiastic and motivated to participate in reading circles discussions. They enjoy participating in them. The majority of students of both academic years answered “very much”. The students also gave positive answers to the third question “Do you think having a role in reading circles made you better prepared to discuss the book?”, thus assigning very high value to this item.

According to the high values that they attributed to the question item “Do you like it when the discussion is organized by you or your peers?” (4.77 - in 2019-2020 academic year and 4.78 - in 2020-2021 academic year), they seem to enjoy group activities and they like it when the discussions are organized by their peers and when they themselves are responsible for organizing discussions. They feel comfortable to be involved into the discussion led by their peers. The majority of participants indicated “very much” answering the proposed question.

The students were also asked if they would like to experience reading circles again. The majority of participants responded that they would like to do the activity in the future “very much”, some of them answered “pretty much”.

The students who participated in reading circles became more curious about what they were reading as well as more involved and absorbed in the texts. When educators create an environment, such as reading circle, they are promoting curiosity among their students. The educators who use reading circles help their students understand and discuss the information behind the text giving them the chance to share their viewpoints with each other and think reflectively.

Such literature discussions provide a good platform for students to use language in different ways, even those who are not fully proficient in English and they give them a good opportunity to develop their communicative competence. One of the advantages of the discussion process using this teaching method

is that students may feel more comfortable asking questions and interacting with the whole class with such a positive discussion landscape (Cox & Boyd-Batstone, 1997).

When students discuss the stories with their peers, they participate in higher level thinking through such connections as text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world. Lent (2006) found that when students were actively engaged in critical thinking activities with peers, they participated more actively, took part in rich discussions with one another and expanded their knowledge about the discussed topic (p. 69).

7. Conclusion

1. The studied method helps the lesson to be completely centered on students and contributes to progressive formation of their communicative competence. This method can be applied not only in offline teaching process but also in online format of teaching. It was used in distance learning on Zoom platform and was proved to be effective.

2. The discussion in the lesson using reading circles method allows students to share ideas with their peers within the frameworks of sociocultural context. The discussion is not limited. This method helps to defocus from an educator and students become more responsible for the learning process itself. This helps them to be centered not on the text itself but on their personal knowledge and experience. Such atmosphere contributes to motivating learning landscape.

3. Based on the result of data analysis using the questionnaires, it is concluded that the use of reading circles has a positive impact on students' motivation and their involvement into the discussion process. This method is a good platform for stimulating active work in the lesson. Students who experience reading circles tend to be deeply involved into the discussion process of the studied material.

4. The results of this study may encourage other educators to use reading circles in their EFL lessons.

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