

LITERATURE CIRCLES AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL READING AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION IN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article examines literature circles as a collaborative framework for developing critical reading and literary interpretation among university EFL learners. It synthesizes research on student-led discussion, reading comprehension, critical thinking, graded readers, and digitally mediated literature circles, including published studies, systematic reviews, and thesis research. The review indicates that literature circles can strengthen comprehension and interpretive engagement when role structures are used flexibly, discussion is anchored in textual evidence, and learners are gradually moved from assigned responsibilities toward autonomous literary dialogue. Recent meta-analytic and systematic-review evidence also supports positive effects on L2 reading, while showing that outcomes depend on learner level, materials, assessment, and implementation design. The article proposes a humanities-oriented model in which literature circles combine close reading, collaborative interpretation, and reflective response.

Keywords: literature circles; EFL; critical reading; literary interpretation; reading comprehension; collaborative learning; higher education.

1. Introduction

Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups in which learners read a common text and assume responsibility for interpreting and discussing it. Daniels (2002) popularized the model as a form of student-centered reading that combines choice, response, and collaborative talk. In EFL education, the model is attractive because it turns reading from an individual decoding exercise into a social process in which learners explain meanings, question interpretations, cite passages, and negotiate uncertainty.

For humanities education, the significance of literature circles extends beyond reading comprehension. Literary interpretation requires attention to ambiguity, point of view, figurative language, characterization, narrative structure, historical context, and competing interpretations. These processes are difficult to develop through teacher explanation alone. A circle creates a setting in which students must externalize interpretive reasoning. They hear alternative readings, defend claims with textual evidence, and revise assumptions in response to peers.

Research in EFL contexts has increasingly examined these possibilities. Hsu (2004) presented literature circles as a route toward independent reading in an EFL classroom. Castro's (2019) master's thesis investigated the strategy in relation to critical thinking and reported stronger post-test performance for students taught through literature circles. Sutrisno and colleagues (2020) connected the model to critical reading among university learners. More recent systematic and meta-analytic work indicates that literature circles have generally positive effects on L2 reading, while also emphasizing

variation in implementation and outcome measures (Ma, Ismail, & Saharuddin, 2023; Ma, 2025).

II. Methods and Methodology of Research

The present study is a focused review of literature-circle research relevant to EFL and ESL reading, with particular attention to higher education and the teaching of literary texts. The review integrates conceptual descriptions of the model, empirical classroom studies, a master's thesis, systematic review findings, and a recent meta-analysis. The goal is interpretive synthesis rather than statistical replication.

The analysis addressed four questions: (1) How do literature circles support critical reading and literary interpretation? (2) Which structural elements of the model appear most important? (3) What problems emerge when literature circles are transferred to EFL settings? (4) How can the model be adapted for university humanities courses? Sources were coded for comprehension, critical thinking, discussion quality, learner autonomy, role structure, text choice, technology, and assessment.

The review gives special weight to research in which literature circles are used with L2 English learners. Ma's (2025) meta-analysis is particularly useful because it synthesizes experimental and quasi-experimental evidence and reports a large overall effect on L2 reading comprehension. The systematic review by Ma, Ismail, and Saharuddin (2023) broadens the picture by identifying themes such as self-regulation, reading skills, attitudes, cultural awareness, critical thinking, and engagement. These syntheses are interpreted alongside individual studies that illuminate how discussion actually functions.

III. Results

The first result of the synthesis is that literature circles improve reading by making comprehension accountable to peers. A student who must summarize a chapter, identify a significant passage, formulate a question, or explain a cultural reference reads with a communicative purpose. The assigned role externalizes a component of expert reading. Daniels (2002) emphasizes that roles are scaffolds rather than permanent identities; their purpose is to help learners acquire discussion habits that eventually become more flexible and independent.

The second result concerns critical reading. Castro (2019) found that literature-circle instruction was effective in strengthening critical thinking skills in reading. Sutrisno et al. (2020) similarly link circle-based activity to critical reading among university EFL students. The mechanism is not simply that students speak more. Productive circles require claims to be tested against the text. When one reader interprets a character as unreliable, another may challenge the claim, point to a contradictory passage, or propose an alternative motive. This exchange creates a miniature interpretive community in which evidence and reasoning become visible.

Third, literature circles can support comprehension across proficiency levels. McElvain (2010) found positive academic and psychosocial effects from transactional literature circles with English learners in mainstream classrooms. In EFL settings, Chou (2022) investigated graded readers and found that literature circles can support reading performance and strategy use. These findings suggest that text difficulty should be matched carefully to the learners: the discussion cannot become interpretively rich if most cognitive effort is consumed by basic decoding.

Fourth, recent synthesis research strengthens the empirical case for the method. Ma (2025) analyzed 15 samples involving 899 participants and found a large overall effect on L2 reading comprehension. The study also showed that effects varied according to factors such as learner level and assessment format. This matters pedagogically because literature circles should not be treated as a universal technique with identical results in every context. A university seminar reading a short story, a secondary class using graded readers, and an online reading group involve different linguistic and interpretive demands.

Fifth, literature circles increasingly operate in digital environments. Kassem (2022) developed a Literature Circles 2.0 model for English majors and reported benefits for comprehension of literary texts and online self-regulated learning. Digital platforms can extend discussion through shared annotations, asynchronous forums, collaborative documents, and multimodal responses. At the same time, online tools can fragment attention if discussion becomes a collection of isolated comments. The literary text must remain the common object around which interaction is organized.

Sixth, the literature highlights risks in over-structuring. Role sheets can help inexperienced readers, but rigid repetition may reduce authentic dialogue to task completion. Students may speak only when their designated role is called, producing parallel reports instead of genuine interaction. The most effective progression therefore appears to move from explicit roles toward open, evidence-based discussion. As learners gain confidence, the teacher can reduce procedural control and increase interpretive responsibility.

IV. Discussion

For university humanities courses, literature circles should be designed around interpretive problems rather than generic comprehension questions. A short story may be approached through focalization, unreliable narration, symbolism, ethical conflict, or historical context. Different students can initially prepare distinct lenses, but the group should then integrate them. The objective is not to discover one authorized meaning; it is to compare plausible interpretations and evaluate the textual evidence supporting each.

A useful instructional sequence begins with individual annotation. Students mark passages that appear ambiguous, stylistically distinctive, culturally unfamiliar, or ethically significant. In the circle, they introduce these passages and explain why they matter. Peers respond by extending, questioning, or reframing the interpretation. The group then produces a short synthesis identifying one point of agreement and one unresolved interpretive question. This structure combines close reading with collaborative reasoning.

The teacher's role also changes. Rather than dominating interpretation, the teacher designs texts and prompts, models evidence-based reasoning, monitors participation, and intervenes when discussion becomes factually inaccurate or exclusionary. Assessment can combine individual and group dimensions: reading notes, contribution quality, use of textual evidence, reflective writing, and a final analytical response. Such assessment discourages superficial participation and makes clear that discussion is a means of developing individual interpretive competence.

The review also suggests that literature circles are particularly valuable for EFL learners because they integrate receptive and productive language use. Students read a text, listen to peers, formulate spoken interpretations, negotiate meaning, and later convert discussion into writing. Literary vocabulary and analytical metalanguage recur across these modes. The method therefore links language development to disciplinary practice rather than treating literature as decorative content added after language instruction.

V. Conclusion

Literature circles provide a strong framework for critical reading and literary interpretation in EFL higher education when they are used as flexible scaffolds for evidence-based dialogue. Research from classroom studies, thesis work, systematic review, and meta-analysis indicates benefits for comprehension, engagement, critical thinking, strategy use, and learner autonomy. The model is most effective when texts are accessible enough to sustain discussion, roles are gradually relaxed, and assessment rewards interpretive reasoning rather than mere completion of duties. In humanities-oriented EFL courses, literature circles can make literary reading simultaneously linguistic, analytical, and social. Future research should examine how different genres, digital platforms, and multilingual discussion practices influence the quality of literary interpretation over longer periods.

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