Investigating the Content Based Perspectives of the Literature Circles on the Students' Literary Response

دور الدوائر الأدبية في تعزيز الاستجابة الأدبية للقارئ: منظور قائم على المحتوى

Toufik Koussa *	**Naouel Abdellatif Mami**
Doctoral student, Assistant Teacher Class	**Professor, Professorship**
A, Kasdi Merbah university -Ourgla-	**Mohamed Lamine Debaghine Sétif 2 university**
toufik75.koussa@hotmail.com	**dr.abdellatifnaouel@yahoo.fr**

Abstract: This study investigates the content-based perspectives of the literature circles on the reader response. The study was carried out as an experimental research with a total of 60 second-year students at the department of English Language and Literature at Mohamed Lamine Debaghine, Setif2 University. The study concluded that the literature circles are effective in developing students' abilities to understand, interpret, and respond to a literary text. Besides the implementation of this strategy, a number of related recommendations were suggested.

- **Keywords:** Content Based Instruction, critical thinking, Literature Circles, Reader Response, teaching literature.

الملخص: تركز هذه الدراسة على تنفيذ "الحلقات الأدبية" كاستراتيجية لتحسين استجابة القارئ وتحليل النص ومهارات التفسير في تدريس النصوص الأدبية. أجريت الدراسة كبحث تجريبي حيث شارك في الدراسة 60 طالباً في السنة الثانية من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها بجامعة محمد لمين دباغين -سطيف 2. في نهاية التجربة عندما تمت مقارنة نتائج الاختبار القبلي والبعدي لاستجابة الطلاب للقراءة، لوحظ فرق ذو دلالة إحصائية وبناءً على نتائجه، حيث أن "الحلقات الأدبية" فعالة في تنمية قدرات الطلاب على فهم النص الأدبي وتفسيره والاستجابة له، جانب تنفيذ هذه الاستراتيجية عبر الطلاب عن زيادة في الثقة بالنفس، والتعلم التعاوني، والتفكير النقدي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم القائم على المحتوى، التفكير النقدي، الحلقات الأدبية، استجابة القارئ، تدريس الأدب.

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*-Corresponding author

- Introduction:

In teaching literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, a variety of strategies, such as the Traditional approach, the Language-Based approach, and the Reader-Response approach, as well as a multiplicity of techniques, such as Scaffold Instruction, Modeling, Cooperative Learning, Independent Reading, and Literary Response, have been frequently used aiming at making the learning process and activities, related to literature, more motivating and interesting.

However, novel methods should be searched and implemented to improve the literary reading response and interpretive skills needed most, by students, to cope with both their reading courses (literature) and life experiences. In the Algerian university, reading is taught, mostly, though literary texts in courses concerned with English literature. Many attempts, to answer complex problems relating to methods of teaching literature practiced by teachers of literature in the classrooms are acknowledged.

Literature teaching is facing some problems, especially in institutions where English is a second or a foreign language; Abdalla & Adam (n.d.) list five problems faced by those learners who are learning the English literature. They are (1) literature has unusual and difficult/specific language, (2) literature has lack of functional authenticity, (3) imbalance of the four skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading when teaching literature (4) there is likely inequity of knowledge and power between the lecturers and their students, and (5) in the literature teaching there is often no sequencing and staging posts.

These problems were investigated in regard to methods used by teachers of literature within the departments of English but most of the studies focus more on the teachers' behavior in providing learning materials on the English literature, such as poetry, prose, drama, literary theory and criticism, history of literature, and the like. As Krishnasamy (2015) claims, "we can't assume that one teaching method or another will solve problems. No one method can meet all the demands of learning" (p. 75).

To surpass these constraints in teaching literature, or at least a larger part of them, researchers and educators turned their attention towards one of the newest methods and approaches to teaching literature which is Content Based Instruction (CBI). (Shang, 2006) claims that "To effectively teach academic subject matter and foreign language skills, EFL teachers should collaborate content-based instruction and literature study. (Brinton et al., 2016) list several benefits of collaborating CBI and literature teaching showing that students can gain knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and paragraph structure, interactive communication skills, and types and styles of writing.

Besides, according to (Custodio & Sutton, 1998), literature is a valuable language tool, so it can help language students increase their motivation, explore prior knowledge, and promote literacy development. Tasneen (2010) further supports that language and literature cannot be separated because each has something important to offer in the growth of a well-equipped learner. Literature teaches idiomatic language and cultural context; it can also improve reading and comprehension skills, promote correctness in speech and writing, and encourage students to read for enjoyment" (Shang, 2006) In view of the above description, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

• How does CBI facilitate the implementation of Literature Circles to increase students' literary response?

• How does the use of literature circles affect the students' literary responses?

• What are the students' perceptions towards the use of literature circles?

In the light of the previous description and research questions, the researcher intended to verify the following hypothesis:

1. There would be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control one in the post-test concerning the use of literature circles in improving students' literary response in favor of the former.

1- Literature Review:

1.1- The rationale behind using literature circles

The role of literature in the EFL curriculum has always been debated. (McKay, 1982) lists some of the advantages of using literature in language classroom. She asserts that literature in language classroom makes L2 learners motivated enough to read largely in English and this sum of reading leads to cultural knowledge and sensitivity and increases learners' reading skills.

Besides, (Langer, 1997) states, when discussing the use of literature in language classroom," because it taps what the learners know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy" (p. 607). According to Langer, literature permits students to mirror what they read on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open" horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607).

Tasneen (2010) specifies four perspectives for literature and discusses these perspectives' use in language teaching context. According to him: at the simplest level literature is not qualitatively different from any other linguistic performance...literature provides instances of language structure in use, which can form the basis for instruction and practice in language skills, especially accompanied by a varying amount of grammatical analysis and explanation" (pp. 178-179).

Furthermore, Tasneen asserts that "at the third level literature is the expression of the superficial subject matter as it relates events or describes scenes: the plot of a drama or the story of a novel" (p.178). Another argument for using literature in a CBI program is the lack of reliable and authentic situations for language teaching. Tasneen mentions literature as one of other ways to compensate for the absence of real events and authentic material in language classroom. Concerning the fourth perspective, He adds "as a level at which literature is a symbolization of the author's vision of these events and his or her worldview" (p.178). It is at this level that the shift from receptive

skills to productive skills increases. Here again literature may be regarded as a source for generalizing and theorizing in language classroom.

1-2- Content-based Instruction through Literature circles

The implementation of Content Based Instructions in a literature course with respect to the objectives of EFL curriculum is not an endeavor without risks. It is hard to adapt Content Based Instructions activities to literature in an Algerian context characterized mostly by a teacher-centered approach in teaching literature, large classes, and a certain laziness of both students, to read large literary texts as novels or short stories and teacher, to adopt new methods and strategies in their teaching.

In order to overcome these problems of adaptation and implementation, researchers, as Shang (2006), suggest Reader Response model, as part of CBI, to apply on teaching literary texts through literature circles. Shang based most of his ideas on Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory. A significant assumption of reader response principle is that reader's attitude is critical itself. The stance a reader takes whilst studying a textual content could have an influence on the meaning that the reader gets. A learner taking an aesthetic stance reads with interest to enjoy and what he/she is wondering and feeling at some stage within the reading. Rosenblatt (1988) calls this the "lived through experience." however, with an efferent stance the reader's primary goal is to accumulate information. The aim is to find out something greater than experience something (Ibid).

Another assumption of reader response theory is while originated and grounded, and multiple interpretations are predictable meaning is still personal. Each reader interprets a situation with different background knowledge and various experiences. Spiegel (1998) lists various perspectives that are part of the equation of meaning-making including the author's, the reader's, and the "changing interpretation within one reader when faced with challenges to her or his interpretation from the text or from others" (p. 43). Response, then, is not a onetime occurrence; as responses change through time and are influenced by other people and experiences.

In literature circles, students enrich their original interpretations as they hear the ideas of their peers ((Day, 2003). In reconsidering meanings and connections that they want to share in their groups, learners often reread texts, or parts of them, and reexamine some issues; they will "retreat" and acquire new meanings (Rosenblatt, 1988) Moreover, hearing several interpretations encourages students to think critically and consider other possibilities of looking at meaning. In addition, "students develop the ability to confirm, extend, and modify interpretations as they are exposed to classmates' considerations" (Almasi & Mckeown, 1996). These reader-oriented discussions of different interpretations are helpful for learners because they will develop a kind of n autonomy in getting meaning from literary texts without adhering to the authority of the teacher who is not the sole provider of meaning. Therefore, students take responsibility for identifying, exploring, and resolving their own questions and for monitoring their own meaning-making (Spiegel, 1998).

Furr (2004) describes the literature circles as a group of six student readers in which each reader effectuates an assigned reading task on the same literary work given to them by their instructor or chosen by them. He proposes six roles for fictional texts which he labels: Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word Master, Passage Person and Culture Collector. Each one of these roles necessitates students to read the same text with a different aim, with precise instructions and activities described on a role sheet.

Students fill the role sheet and use it as the source of their group-based discussion. In this model, as proposed by Furr, the diverse reading activities comprise reading for literary and cultural issues, vocabulary, and preparing to lead the group in discussion. Per se, literary texts become more manageable and untroublesome and meaning becomes accessible as the need for dictionaries, or the instructor, is reduced with extensive rather than intensive input. At the same time, since the input is comprehensible (Krashen, 1982) opportunities for deeper meaningful student utterances and critical thinking in the discussion are raised.

2- Research methodology:

2.1- Research Design and Method

The study was designed as quasi-experimental research. This kind of research aims to examine cause-effect relationships. It also works well for research that involves a relatively limited and well-defined set of independent variables that can either be manipulated or controlled. (Etikan, 2016) This quasi-experimental study suits well the situation in the department as far as the selection of participants is concerned because every teacher is assigned to teach a given number of groups that are oriented systematically by an administrative software (SEES v.3,00 and PROGRES) which means there was no selection in the population. In this study, there were two groups, of 30 students each. One is the experimental group and the other the Control group. The experimental group is given the treatment of the research (Literature circles), while the Control group is taught by the traditional teacher-centred strategy in which there is no treatment received.

The design consists of one independent variables and one dependent variable. Literature Circles (LC) strategy as first independent variable (X1), and the second variable was students' literary response as a dependent variable (Y). In order to obtain detailed data about the students' book reading experiences and their views about the quality of implementation, students were given a questionnaire built in a Likert scale form. Thus, by using both quantitative and qualitative research methods together, methodological triangulation was done to determine the effect of literature circles reading activities on the students' literary response.

2-2- Population and Sample:

The population of the research consisted of a total of 60 second-year students in two groups (30 students in each group) in the department of English Language and Literature. In the experimental group 7 students (23.33%) were male and 23 (76.66%) were female; while in the control group 8 students (26.66%) were male and 22 (73.33%) were female. Concerning age, 18 students, of the control group, aged

between 18-19 representing 60% while 11 students aged more than 21 representing 36.66%. In the experimental group, 25 students aged between 18-19 representing 83.33% while 5 students aged more than 21 representing 16.66%.

The participants in the sample were selected using homogenous sampling. (Etikan, 2016), p. 3) define homogenous sampling as a form of sampling that "focuses on candidates who share similar traits or specific characteristics. The idea is to focus on this precise similarity and how it relates to the topic being researched" Table 1 below, demonstrates the distribution according to group and gender.

Table N°1. Frequencies of group and gender

Group * Gender Cross tabulation		Male	Female	Total
Group	Control Group	8	22	30
	Experiment Group	7	23	30
Total		15	45	60

2. 3. Data Collection Tools

The diagnostic test from The SAT Literature Test is composed of two extracts that concern two different literary genres (fiction and poetry) followed by ten multiple choice questions for each extract evaluated according to four factors of Aspects of Literary Response: A New Questionnaire (David S. Miall & Kuiken, 1995) namely Story-driven reading, empathy, concern with author, imagery vividness with the exclusion of three elements (Leisure escape, Insight, rejection of literary work) which cannot be measured through a test. In the first implementation of the Sat Literature Test, Cronbach alpha (reliability coefficient) was calculated as 0.782.

Table N°2. Cronbach's Alpha of the Sat literature

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.782	7

It is clear from the table that the stability coefficient was high, as its value was (0.78), which is an appropriate parameter for the purposes of the study or for conducting the study.

3-Data Analysis and Interpretation:

The data obtained through The Sat Literature Test, were statistically analyzed using SPSS 23 software. The answers the students gave to reply to the questionnaire were analyzed through frequencies and percentages to express the students' opinions in a numerical form.

3.1- Quantitative results

In this section, the change in the students' literary response at the end of the 14-week literature circles strategy and the content analysis of the students' perceptions on literature circles are presented.

3.1.1-Pretest Results:

Table N°3. Pretest scores summary

	Experimental Group	Control Group
Number of students	30	30
Highest Score	69.33	72.66
Frequency of the highest score	1	1
Lowest score	33.33	30.33
Frequency of the Lowest score	2	2
Mean Score	54.91	53.75
Standard Deviation	10.72	13.25

Table 3 shows that the highest score for the experimental group reaches 69.33, while the lowest score is 33.33. The frequencies for the highest score and the lowest score are 1 and 2 respectively. It means that in the experimental group there is one student got 72.66 and two students got 33.33. The mean score is 54.91 with 10.72 for the standard deviation. In the meantime, the highest score in the control group is 76.67 and the lowest is 30.00. The frequency for the highest score is 1, while the

frequency for the lowest score is 2. The average score is 53.75 with standard deviation 13.25. The mean difference between the experimental and control group is 1.16 point.

Looking at the mean difference, the groups are not too different in their ability. Thus, to check the experimental and control groups' equivalence before the experiment, a t-analysis was conducted using independent t-test. The result became the basis in choosing the appropriate inferential statistics for the posttest scores.

Based on the analysis, the t-test analysis yielded a t of 0.37 with 30 degrees of freedom (df). The critical value for df 30 at the level of significance of .05 one-tailed is 1.667. T-value of 0.37 is lower than the critical value of 1.667. Therefore, it is concluded that the experimental and control group are not significantly different in their literary analysis, interpretation, and appreciation before the experiment. They have an equivalent starting point. The condition was the basis of choosing independent t-test for the final data analysis. Table 4 shows the summary of the result of pretest scores analysis.

Table N°4. Summary of the results of pretest scores analysis

Degrees of Freedom (df)	T-Value	Level of significance	Critical T-Value
30	0.37*	0.05	1.667

* Not significant : p > 0.05

3.1.2- Posttest Results:

Table N°5. Posttest scores summary

	Experimental Group	Control Group
Number of students	30	30
Highest score	91.25	85.66
Frequency of the highest score	1	1
Lowest score	49.75	35.66
Frequency of the lowest score	3	3
Average score	69.70	57.81

Standard deviation	12.67	13.68

Table 5 shows that the highest score in the posttest is 91.25 for experimental group, and 85.66 for the control group. Only one student got 91.25. In the control group, the highest score was achieved by only one student as well. Meanwhile, the lowest score falls to 49.75 and 36.66 for experimental and control group respectively. The frequencies for the lowest score in the experimental and control groups are 3. The average score for experimental group reaches 69.70, while the control group reaches only 57.81. The standard deviation for experimental group is 12.27 and 13.68 for control group. If the posttest means scores of both experimental and control group are compared, we will get that the mean score of the experimental group is 11.89 point higher than that of the control group.

Compared to the pretest, the result of the posttest shows that the average scores for both groups increased. One may conclude with certainty that literature circles are more effective especially if the mean scores are compared. The mean score gain for experimental group is 14.79 point and 4.06 point for the control group. The difference is 10.73 which is a significant value.

For further analysis, a statistical analysis using independent t-test was conducted. Based on the analysis, the t-test analysis yielded a t of 3.24 with 30 degrees of freedom (df). The t-critical value with df= 30 and p=.05 one-tailed is 1.667. The t value (3.24) exceeds the critical value (1.667). It means that mean difference between the experimental and control group is significant. Table 6 shows the summary of the result of posttest scores analysis.

Table N°5. Summary of the result of posttest scores analysis

Degree of Freedom (df)	T-Value	Level of Significance	Critical T-Value
30	3.24*	0.05	1.667

* Significant: $p < 0.05$

Based on the analysis, Ho stating that "There would be no a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the

control one in the pre-test, concerning the use of literature circles in improving students' literary response" is rejected. Thus, the research hypothesis stating that "There would be a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group and the control one in the post-test concerning the use of literature circles in improving students' literary response in favour of the former" is accepted.

3.1.3. Pretest/Posttest Findings:

The findings suggest that literature circles, as a strategy, are effective in developing students' literary response. Some possible causes may support the effectiveness of literature circles. First, literature circles are effective since students can choose what they want to read. Using literature circles permits teachers to allow students to connect to text.

Second, group discussion, through roles, allows students to acquire new ways to deepen their understanding, develop new strategies in interpreting the literary text by negotiation for meaning, and improve their insights.

Third, through collaborative work, students gain self-confidence by accessing to each other's thinking processes and teach one another effective reading strategies.

Fourth, literature circles allow students to give their personal responses to reading. Reader response can improve literary analysis, interpretation, and appreciation of literature in that students are permitted to bring their personal experiences and background knowledge to their reading. When they link information in the text to their prior knowledge and life experiences, they may have error interpretation.

However, through discussion, they can refer back to their first interpretation. As they interact and discuss, they will be able to recognize their understanding or interpretation errors. Then, they learn to reconsider their initial interpretation. Reader response also allows students to understand that reading means not only having the

right answer or interpreting correctly, but also making connections with text. Thus, students become engaged and reflective readers.

3.2.1. Questionnaire Data Analysis:

These findings are confirmed by the analysis of the answer's student gave to the questionnaire administered at the end of the implementation process. From table 6, it was about 46.9% of students agreed and 49% of students Strongly Agreed that "literature circles are better than the conventional way of teaching literature", and 67.3% of students strongly agreed that "the roles motivated the student to read". They were motivated to read the book to perform in literature circles and to prepare something about the book (53% strongly Agreed). About 53.1% (strongly agree) believed that the literature circles improved their reading fluency and vocabulary mastery.

It can be summarized that most students give a positive perception toward literature circles. It is worth to mention that the response scale was codified as follows. Strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, strongly disagree = 4.

Table N°7. Students' perceptions toward literature circle

Questions	1	2	3	4
Literature circles are better than the conventional way.	0%	4.1%	46.9%	49%
The roles motivated the student to read	2%	6.1%	24.5%	67.3%
Literature circles motivate the student to prepare and read.	0%	10.2%	36.7%	53.1%
Group discussion enhances understanding	0%	10.2%	49%	40.8%
Literature circles engage students more	0%	10.2%	55.1%	34.7%
Literature circles develop understanding, analytical skills	2%	2%	34.7%	61.2%
Literature circles help in increasing reading fluency	2%	4.1%	40.8%	53.1%

Literature circles can improve vocabulary mastery	2%	4.1%	26.5%	67.3%
Literature circles are challenging but fun	4.1%	8.2%	57.1%	30.6%

3.2. 2. Questionnaire Findings:

Based on the results above, it is clear that students showed active participation and positive perceptions towards literature circles. It can be seen from their preparedness before presenting their roles in the literature circles, including the motivation to read the work before class. Certainly, one perception influences how the learner executes the task and completes the assignment (McLellan, 2012). This applies to literature circles too in the sense that when students have positive perceptions towards the literature circles, they will finish the task well and prepare the following associated tasks pleasingly. More importantly, when students perceive the task positively, they feel confident about their ability to complete the task successfully. In the case of this current study, the participants admitted that they managed to learn better, improve their literary response skills, and develop their reading fluency and vocabulary mastery through literature circles. Clearly, learners who are involved in the literature circles often outperform those who read in the traditional method in terms of text understanding, analysis, and interpretation (Thomas & Kim, 2019).

Moreover, the students' positive perception and high motivation to complete the reading task greatly impact their teamwork. Students actively participated in the discussion and at the same time encouraged others to do the same. This is in line with (Snow, 2001) and (Nazri & Latiff, 2013), who state that collaborative work is beneficial to enhance student learning and increase motivation. Students appreciated the group work during the literature circles. Most students felt motivated to read literary texts because they would discuss them with others. Besides, they enjoyed learning with their peers because they learned better. They believed they improved their reading skill and confidence by discussing what they read with others, which echoes (Iskhak, 2015). It is confirmed in a more recent study by Thomas and Kim

(2019), which revealed that participation in a literature circle helped the participants comprehend the text better and build a connection with the assigned text as they were involved in group discussion and shared opinion with others.

Literature circles roles, also, contribute in creating a positive learning atmosphere as the majority of participants mentioned that they were motivated to read because they have a specific role assigned to them. Besides, learners would have a clear focus on what they do when they take roles (Hsu, 2004). Different roles assigned to each student also provide an opportunity for the students to be an expert on what they have read, which was evident in how the students prepared for their role and performed it well during the literature circles. The students had positive perceptions toward the literature circles because of their responsibility through different roles and the novelty of the Thomas and Kim (2019).

4-Conclusion:

The results of this study showed that literature circles were effective in developing students' literary response demonstrated through the development of their understanding, analysis, and interpretation of literary texts. It was determined that the results of the implementation of literature circles echo the findings of Miall LRQ concerning Leisure escape, Insight, Story-driven reading, Empathy, concern with author, and imagery vividness.

The data show that literature courses which were taught through traditional method (teacher centered) could be realized in a more enjoyable and attractive atmosphere through literature circles. The views obtained from the students and the findings of other studies support this conclusion (Briggs, 2010).

It was also concluded that reading a whole literary work as a group and talking about it afterwards was more enjoyable than individual reading. Moreover, it was ascertained that literature circles activities turned most students into more interested, willing, and self-confident learners when it came to reading, participation, and interpretation.

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