

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD LITERATURE
CIRCLES AT SAMPOERNA SCHOOL OF EDUCATION:
A STUDY ON STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
TEACHING DEPARTMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning in the 21st century has demanded the development of essential skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity. One learning strategy that fosters these skills is Literature Circles (LC). However, while LC has proven effective in various educational contexts, its implementation in English as Foreign Language (EFL) settings presents unique challenges, including language barriers and unfamiliarity with structured discussion roles. This study aims to explore students' perceptions toward the use of LC as a collaborative reading strategy in an EFL context, specifically at the Sampoerna School of Education. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, involving classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with first-year English Language Teaching students who participated in LC sessions. Thematic analysis based on Feldman's framework of perception (knowledge, experience, hope, and motivation) was used to code the data. The findings indicate that students generally have positive perceptions of LC. They view it as an engaging and beneficial strategy that enhances reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and critical thinking. However, students also reported difficulties with certain roles and language-related challenges, which they overcame through peer support and simplified strategies. In conclusion, despite its challenges, Literature Circles can serve as an effective tool for fostering collaborative learning and improving literacy skills in EFL contexts when implemented with appropriate guidance and scaffolding.

Keywords: *Literature Circles, EFL learners, Student perception, Collaborative learning, Reading comprehension*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the educational landscape has undergone significant transformation, particularly in the learning process. In the 20th century, students were largely passive recipients of information, relying on teachers as the sole source of knowledge (Boss, 2012). Teachers delivered information while students listened and followed instructions. However, with the advent of the 21st

century, this dynamic has shifted. Students are now expected to become independent and proactive learners (Jerald, 2009). Technology plays a pivotal role in this transition, enabling students to learn autonomously anytime and anywhere (Slavin et al., 2008, in McClure, 2009).

This paradigm shift has introduced new challenges. Willingham (2008) states that 21st-century education requires learners to think creatively, collaborate effectively, and demonstrate innovation. Similarly, Singh (1991) and Bailie (2011) assert that integrating technology into instruction is essential for real-world application. Therefore, students must cultivate skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking (Jerald, 2009) to succeed both academically and professionally.

These essential skills can be developed through diverse learning methodologies in schools. Freeman (2000) emphasizes the importance of varied instructional approaches in equipping students with opportunities to collaborate, communicate, and grow intellectually. One of the most effective of these approaches is collaborative learning, which engages students in collective intellectual efforts to solve problems, build understanding, or create meaningful products (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). In such settings, individual contributions are valued and integrated into group achievements.

Among various collaborative learning strategies, Literature Circles (LC) stand out as a particularly effective method. Defined as small, temporary discussion groups centered around a shared literary text (Daniels, 2002), LC encourages deep engagement with the text and with peers. Each group member assumes a specific role, fostering responsibility and structured interaction. While previously known as "Reading Groups" or "Book Clubs," LC activities have evolved to emphasize not only reading but also discussion, reflection, and connection to personal experiences.

Nevertheless, implementing LC in EFL contexts is not without challenges. Furr (2004) observed that EFL students who selected their own reading materials without instructor guidance often encountered linguistic difficulties, such as

unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures, which hindered comprehension and group discussion.

Despite these obstacles, numerous studies support the effectiveness of LC in EFL settings. Daniels (2002), along with Noe and Johnson (1999), highlighted benefits such as fostering reading habits, cultivating respect for others' viewpoints, enhancing critical thinking, and promoting collaborative learning. Empirical studies in Asia have also shown that LC boosts literacy skills in Taiwan (Chiu, 2010), encourages reading motivation in Japan (Mark, 2007), and contributes to a positive classroom atmosphere in Taiwan (Chiang & Huang, 2004).

Given both the benefits and challenges of LC, this study seeks to explore how students at Sampoerna School of Education perceive this strategy. The LC program was implemented as an extracurricular activity by the English Language Teaching Department and involved first-year students from various regions in Indonesia. These students bring diverse learning experiences and cultural backgrounds, which are important variables in shaping their perceptions. This study investigates their views on LC, factors influencing those perceptions, difficulties encountered, and strategies used to overcome those challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are some studies that investigate the benefits of Literature Circles. The research has been conducted by Daniels (2002) and also Johnson and Noe (1999). Daniels (2002) said that many students can listen to and share responses with peers respectfully. In giving opinion, students settle arguments by digging back into the text. It strengthens their interpretation and sharpens their critical thinking toward literature. He also emphasized the benefit of this technique contains in of the long-lasting reading habit in students. Other advantages are also stated by Johnson and Noe (1999). From them, there are three advantages in using Literature Circles. The first advantage is to provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books collaboratively. They will construct the literature meaning with other readers. Secondly, it guides

students to comprehend their reading through responding in discussion session. Lastly, Literature Circle also provides students a group discussion, in which they must gather and do collaborative learning. In collaborative learning, it is expected that students can solve the reading problems together and find enjoyment within it.

In EFL contexts, many learners got benefit from Literature Circles. Some of them are developing students' literacy skill (Chiu, 2010), promoting students' reading interest (Mark, 2007), and creating conducive classroom's climate (Chiang & Huang, 2004). The result of a research which was conducted by Chiu (2010) in Taiwan shows the improvement of students' reading comprehension. Almost all students perform better on the post-course than the pre-course. Their average score increases statistically from 50.9 to 56.7. The increasing result is also shown on Mark's (2007) research which had aimed to see Japanese University students' attitude towards reading in Literature Circles for 2 semesters. The result is Literature Circles increased students' interest in reading statistically from 37% becomes 47% at the end of session. A research by Chiang and Huang (2004) in Tunghai University, Taiwan shows that most students enjoyed taking part in the Literature Circles as their routine of the first year students of English class. They were enthusiastic in discussing various topics within group which asked them to justify opinions, respond and respect different point of views.

However, Furr (2004) has found interesting and in appropriate procedures of Literature Circles in English as Foreign Language (EFL) context. He did revision on Daniels (2002) Eleven Key Ingredients of Literature Circles in the first 4 points. Learners who choose their book by themselves will face the language problems. They will not know what the appropriate book with their language levels. Perhaps, learners in collaboratively will choose the book they like, but in process they will get difficulties in discussion when transferring the text.

From the research about Literature Circles above, this learning strategy gives advantages for the students. When students gather in a group

and discuss a same text or literature in depth, they learn how to work collaboratively and cooperatively. Increasing students' comprehension of the text, critical thinking, and reading interest also become some factors that make Literature Circles are beneficial to do. Besides, they also learn to be respectful in asking questions and giving opinions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' perceptions of the Literature Circles (LC) learning strategy. Qualitative research focuses on understanding participants' experiences through rich, descriptive data collection. Therefore, the study utilized non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews to gather data from English Language Teaching (ELT) students at the Sampoerna School of Education (SSE), who were participating in LC activities outside their regular coursework. The observation sessions captured students' real-time interactions, while interviews provided more in-depth insights into their knowledge, experiences, hopes, and motivations, following Feldman's (2009) framework of perception.

The research was conducted with 12 ELT students from the 2012 cohort, divided into three groups. Four rounds of observations were conducted on 4 sessions in January 2013. After each session, four students were selected at random for interviews using the random sampling method to minimize bias. Observational data were collected in the form of field notes, while interviews followed a flexible checklist format and were audio-recorded for transcription. The operational definitions included "perception in learning" as a process of interpreting stimuli to build knowledge and motivation (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2009), and LC as a collaborative, role-based discussion strategy focused on literary texts (Daniels, 2002).

The analysis involved organizing observation and interview data into structured tables to facilitate coding and theme identification. Observational data were categorized by date and activity to reveal patterns in group behavior. Interview responses were coded into four themes which are knowledge,

experiences, hopes, and motivation as outlined by Feldman (2009). Triangulation between observation and interview data strengthened the validity of the findings. Research procedures included obtaining student consent, conducting observations and interviews, transcribing the data, and integrating both sources to draw conclusions about students' perceptions, challenges faced, and their strategies for overcoming them.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Prior to the Literature Circles, the tutor reminded students of key points such as the stories, roles, and group arrangements. There were three groups, each with four students, and the roles rotated between meetings, as confirmed by Daniels (2002). Each group stayed together for the entirety of the discussion, adhering to the principle that group members should focus on the same text.

The researcher observed all three groups simultaneously in the classroom using video recording and note-taking. Each session lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, and the group compositions remained consistent throughout. The data collected from these interviews were coded according to Feldman's theory (2009).

During the first meeting, 9 out of 12 students attended. The group discussed the story "Judge's House," and the tutor provided instructions regarding time management, scheduling, and the roles within the Literature Circles. The observation highlighted various dynamics, such as some students reading aloud while others struggled to engage in discussion. A notable point was when a student in Group B had difficulty expressing themselves in English, switching to Bahasa Indonesia, and receiving assistance from peers. There were instances of domination in the discussion, particularly in Group C, where one member took on a leadership role, although it was not explicitly assigned.

In the second meeting, 11 students participated. The group read the story "One Dollar's Worth," and the session lasted for 50 minutes. The tutor clarified the roles and helped guide the discussions when necessary. In Group A, there was some confusion about the roles, while in Group B, students were more engaged in

asking and answering questions. Several students exhibited difficulties with certain vocabulary, often switching to Bahasa Indonesia for clarification. A recurring theme was the need for students to ask for help and collaborate when encountering linguistic challenges.

The third meeting lasted 40 minutes, with 11 students present. The group discussed "Juke Judkins' Courtship" by David Stuart. There were some difficulties in understanding the conflict of the story, and Group A showed signs of interruption and confusion. Some students asked the tutor for clarification, while others attempted to connect the story to real-life experiences. In Group B, the discussion was often dominated by one student, while Group C displayed more balanced participation. Issues with vocabulary also arose, and some students sought help from the tutor to better understand the text.

The fourth meeting was the final session, lasting 30 minutes with 11 students present. The group discussed "The Return," and the tutor's absence during part of the session did not significantly disrupt the flow of the discussion. The group demonstrated a high level of cooperation, with members assisting each other when switching between languages. Despite some students struggling with specific vocabulary, the discussions were generally productive, and the session ended with students writing reflections in their journals.

After all those LC activities, 4 participants were interviewed to answer these questions:

Tabel 1: Interview Questions Based on Feldman's (2009) Perception Aspects

No.	Aspects	Questions
1.	Knowledge	<i>"What is Literature Circles?"</i>
2.	Experience 1	<i>"What is your opinion of Literature Circles? (Do you think it is beneficial or not? Why?)"</i>
3.	Experience 2	<i>"Do you find any benefits in participating in Literature Circles? (If yes, what are they? If not, why?)"</i>
4.	Experience 3	<i>"Do you experience any difficulties in participating in Literature Circles? (If yes, what are they and how do you overcome them?)"</i>
5.	Experience 4	<i>"Are there any roles you particularly like? (What</i>

		<i>are they and why?)”</i>
6.	Experience 5	<i>“Are there any roles you dislike? (What are they and why? How do you overcome them?)”</i>
7.	Hopes and Motivations	<i>“What is your recommendation for future implementation of Literature Circles?”</i>

Discussions

Feldman (2009) defined perception as being shaped by five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. He further suggested that these senses allow individuals to interpret their surroundings through four key aspects: knowledge, experiences, hopes, and motivations. After forming a perception of something, individuals will select stimuli that meet their immediate needs, potentially disregarding stimuli that could induce psychological discomfort. Such responses—either positive or negative—can influence the registration of stimuli during the perception process. According to Pomsuwan (2007), perceptions can be categorized as positive or negative. Positive perceptions arise when individuals are exposed to knowledge, opinions, and utilitarian benefits, whereas negative perceptions stem from rejection of such factors.

First, the study analyzed the participants' responses during the interviews regarding their understanding of Literature Circles, specifically the meaning they attached to this strategy. The results of the interview session are summarized in the following table:

Table 2: Students' Understanding of Literature Circles (Knowledge Aspect)

Knowledge	“What is Literature Circles?”
Participant 1	Literature Circles, according to Participant 1, is a strategy focused on reading comprehension in English. It involves identifying key topics, understanding vocabulary, and sharing insights.
Participant 2	Literature Circles is an activity that encourages a love of reading, comprehension of what is read, and critical thinking.
Participant 3	Participant 3 views Literature Circles as an activity that allows for lessons to be drawn from stories, connections made between the story and real life, and vocabulary enrichment.
Participant 4	According to Participant 4, Literature Circles involves reading and discussing a text, relating it to real-life experiences, and exploring new vocabulary through roles like Vocabulary Enricher.

From the table, it is clear that all participants understood the purpose of Literature Circles. Their explanations highlight the different aspects of the activity, including reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and personal connection with the text. Participant 1 emphasized the role of discussion and the importance of sharing insights, particularly around vocabulary and story themes. Participant 2 focused on the motivational and cognitive benefits, noting the role of critical thinking in Literature Circles. Participant 3 and Participant 4 provided insights into how the activity encouraged real-life connections and vocabulary enrichment, with each participant describing their learning experience in relation to specific roles within the group.

Based on these explanations, the participants' understanding aligns with definitions proposed by other scholars. Noe and Johnson (1999, in Daniels, 2002) emphasized that Literature Circles foster in-depth discussion of literature, allowing participants to integrate their experiences with the reading. Bedel (2012) further supported this view by highlighting the cooperative and collaborative learning structure of Literature Circles, which encourages reading for pleasure through various roles. Additionally, Daniels (2002) stressed that Literature Circles offer students the opportunity to think critically.

In terms of experiences, various subcategories were analyzed, including opinions, benefits, difficulties, and strategies for overcoming challenges. These are summarized in the following table:

Table 3: Opinions on Literature Circles

Knowledge	“What is Literature Circles?”
Participant 1	Literature Circles, according to Participant 1, is a strategy focused on reading comprehension in English. It involves identifying key topics, understanding vocabulary, and sharing insights.
Participant 2	Literature Circles is an activity that encourages a love of reading, comprehension of what is read, and critical thinking.
Participant 3	Participant 3 views Literature Circles as an activity that allows for lessons to be drawn from stories, connections made between the story and real life, and vocabulary enrichment.
Participant 4	According to Participant 4, Literature Circles involves reading and discussing a text, relating it to real-life experiences, and exploring new vocabulary through roles like Vocabulary Enricher.
Experiences	“What is your opinion on Literature Circles? (Do you think it is good or not to be implemented? Why?)”

The table indicates that all participants had positive perceptions of Literature Circles. Their feedback emphasizes how the strategy promoted active participation, vocabulary acquisition, and the ability to engage in critical thinking. These perceptions are consistent with Irwanto's (1997, in Najah, 2007) description of positive perceptions, where individuals respond favorably to activities that provide knowledge, utility, and personal development.

In conclusion, the findings show that all participants viewed Literature Circles as a valuable learning strategy, highlighting its potential to foster engagement, critical thinking, and vocabulary development. This positive feedback supports the effectiveness of the method as an educational tool.

After analyzing the students' perceptions regarding the roles they enjoy and the reasons behind their preferences, the next section will explore the roles they dislike, the reasons for their discontent, and how they address the challenges associated with these roles. The results from the interview sessions are summarized in the table below.

Table 4: Disliked Roles, Reasons, and Solutions

Experiences 1	<i>"Do you have roles that you dislike? What are they and why? How do you overcome the difficulties associated with these roles?"</i>
Participant 1	Dislikes the role of Director, as it requires preparing meaningful questions. He finds this uncomfortable, as he feels the questions he generates are too basic and lack depth. To overcome this, he creates questions based on parts of the material he understands well and tries to make the questions more varied and thought-provoking.
Participant 2	Dislikes the role of Illustrator because of her lack of drawing skills. Although she finds drawing challenging, she attempts to draw to the best of her ability and aims to explain her drawings during discussions.
Participant 3	Also dislikes the Illustrator role due to her poor drawing skills. She approaches the problem by drawing without focusing too much on the quality and ensures that she explains the drawing clearly so others can understand it.
Participant 4	Dislikes the role of Facilitator, which involves preparing questions and ensuring the discussion runs smoothly. He finds it challenging when group members haven't read the material, forcing him to retell the story and affecting the flow of the discussion. He addresses this by reminding group members to read the material before meetings.

The table above shows that two roles, Illustrator and Facilitator, are the most disliked by participants. Participants 1 and 4 expressed discomfort with the Facilitator role, while Participants 2 and 3 found the Illustrator role challenging.

For those who disliked the Facilitator role, such as Participant 1, the main difficulty lay in preparing high-quality questions that went beyond basic inquiries. Participant 1 emphasized that the questions should encourage critical thinking and reflection, rather than simple recall. He noted that his questions often seemed too basic, merely asking questions like "If you were him/her, what would you do?" His solution was to focus on parts of the material he understood well, making it easier to craft questions that were both meaningful and varied.

Participant 4 shared similar concerns, noting that the Facilitator's responsibilities often felt overwhelming, especially when group members had not read the text. He expressed frustration with the need to retell the story, which disrupted the flow of the discussion. He addressed this by reminding members in advance to read the material, either through text messages or by posting a reminder on Facebook.

Regarding the Illustrator role, Participants 2 and 3 both expressed frustration due to their lack of drawing skills. Participant 2, in particular, felt that her drawings were ineffective in conveying the intended meaning. Despite this, she made an effort to draw as best as she could and to explain her drawings during discussions. Similarly, Participant 3 admitted that her drawings were not perfect, but she felt that explaining them clearly helped others understand their meaning.

The challenges faced by participants in the Literature Circles align with findings from Chiang and Huang (2004), who identified similar issues such as time constraints, uneven distribution of responsibilities, and the irresponsibility of some members. These challenges highlight how students' responsibilities can increase depending on the role they are assigned, and how the lack of preparation from certain members can disrupt the overall group dynamic.

The final section of students' perceptions explores their hopes and motivations regarding Literature Circles. The table below presents their responses:

Table 5: Hopes and Motivations for Literature Circles

Hopes and Motivation	<i>"What recommendations do you have for future implementations of Literature Circles?"</i>
Participant 1	Suggests that reflection journals should be written immediately after the Literature Circle session, rather than at home, to avoid forgetting key points. He also hopes for a tutor to be present in each group to guide the discussion and

	keep it on track.
Participant 2	Hopes that other group members will not view Literature Circles as an obstacle, but rather as an enjoyable and valuable activity. She also suggests rotating group members in addition to the roles, and aligning the story with the context (e.g., a love story around Valentine's Day).
Participant 3	Hopes to experience working with different groups and learning from others' perspectives in discussions.
Participant 4	Wishes that all group members would read and understand the text beforehand, and that reflection journals be written immediately after the Literature Circle session.

The responses reflect similar views among participants, particularly regarding the timing of journal reflections. Both Participant 1 and Participant 4 suggested that journal reflections should be written immediately after the session to capture their thoughts while they are fresh. This would also prevent students from rushing to complete the reflection later, a practice that often leads to forgetting key details.

Additionally, Participant 1 expressed a desire for a tutor to guide each group to ensure that the discussion stays on track. Participant 4, on the other hand, stressed the importance of all group members reading and understanding the text before the session to avoid wasting time on retelling the story.

Participant 2 emphasized that Literature Circles should not be seen as an obstacle, but as a valuable and enjoyable activity. She suggested rotating group members and tailoring the stories to the context, such as choosing a love story around Valentine's Day, to increase engagement.

Participants 2 and 3 also expressed a desire to work with different group members in future Literature Circles, so they could gain new perspectives and experiences. However, Participant 2 acknowledged that implementing such changes might be difficult due to logistical challenges, such as ensuring that everyone remains responsible for their roles across different groups.

In conclusion, the participants' feedback reveals that while Literature Circles present challenges, they also offer valuable learning experiences. The hopes and motivations expressed by students highlight a desire for more flexibility, support, and engaging content. These suggestions can serve as important considerations for improving the implementation of Literature Circles in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of Literature Circles (LC) within the English Language Teaching Department at Sampoerna School of Education. The findings revealed generally positive perceptions of LC among students, who reported various benefits such as improved vocabulary, enhanced discussion skills, and increased interest in reading and writing. Despite facing several challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and the ability to resolve issues independently. Four main factors shaped their perceptions (knowledge, experience, hopes, and motivation). Students showed an understanding of LC roles and responsibilities and expressed appreciation for roles that allowed creative or personal engagement. They also provided constructive suggestions to improve future LC practices, including changes in reflection timing, group dynamics, and the relevance of selected texts.

Participants reported key challenges during the implementation of LC, including unprepared group members, difficulties recalling discussion content for journal reflections, and struggles with certain roles such as "Facilitator" due to vocabulary limitations. Additionally, dense and unfamiliar vocabulary in the assigned texts presented comprehension barriers. To overcome these difficulties, students employed strategies such as reminding peers to read in advance, focusing reflections on memorable discussion points, narrowing the scope of facilitation to better-understood sections, and using dictionaries or peer assistance to clarify difficult terms.

In response to the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed. Tutors are encouraged to select texts that are contextually relevant and suited to students' vocabulary levels, possibly preceded by a vocabulary activation task. Language support should be provided where necessary, including the flexible use of Bahasa Indonesia. It is also recommended that students write journal reflections immediately after discussions to preserve the freshness of ideas. Furthermore, tutors should emphasize the importance of pre-reading and ensure that students fully understand their assigned roles—potentially through role simulations in initial sessions.

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