Camtree
DIGITAL LIBRARY

RESEARCH REPORT

Teenage boys' engagement and disengagement with pleasure reading: a case study

Shaima B. Illahibaccus-Sona

University of Brighton, UK

Abstract

Background and purpose

Teenage boys' growing disengagement with pleasure reading is an exacerbated educational concern in Mauritius, a multilingual island nation located on the African continent.

Aims

This study investigated the effectiveness of literature circles and their inherent strategies in enhancing twelfth graders' perceptions of their reading abilities.

Study design or methodology

The sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and non-natives language acquisition theory (Krashen, 1989), were applied to the unstructured qualitative case study methodology that this study adopted to elicit in-depth understanding of the examined phenomenon from the viewpoints of the observed. Data was gathered from twelve observed and sound recorded literature circles, informants' reflective diaries and their participation in a focus group discussion.

Findings

The findings revealed that the informants had enchanting reading experiences with literature circles. The informants demonstrated strong engagement in critical reasoning and intertextuality where they establish multiple connections across literature and their individual experiences with reality during the reading discussions. Reading genres such as local fiction, sport-page, geographic travel magazine and self-help were the informants preferred genres. Literature circles enhanced the latter's reading desire, text analysis skills and language development, particularly, vocabulary, spelling accuracy, reading fluency and sentence formation. However, the twelve literature circles were insufficient for the informants to grasp grammar precision and avert word for word translation from Mauritian Creole, their native language to English.

Implications

This study implicates the need to forge new lines of enquiry in regards to how pleasure, playfulness and seriousness can be manifested during teaching and learning processes at school. Implications also include the centrality of having a more sophisticated knowledge base about the impacts, impediments and varying experiences of boys as readers at school and in society. This urges the inclusion of a literary policy which dedicates time slots for pleasure reading in schools.

Keywords: pleasure reading; reading abilities; literature circles

Context

This research studied three twelfth grade boys of seventeen in a mixed secondary school comprising around 600 students in the south of Mauritius.   This research report is derived from an MA thesis submitted to the University of Brighton in 2022, the full text of which is also available as a supplementary file.

Motivation, focus and questions

This research originated from a need I felt as a teacher leader to address twelfth grade boys' disengagement with reading English.

Did your aims link to an initial self-audit, or existing data?

To an initial self-audit.

What was the inquiry focus (including any subject focus and specific elements)?

The inquiry focused on how Literature Circle (LC) alongside its inherent reading strategies could enhance students' perceptions of their reading abilities.

Brief Background of Literature Circle

Originated in L1 English classroom (Reisman, 1994; Pitman, 1997), Literature Circle (LC) is firstly described by Daniels (1994) as a peer led group who frequently meet to share and discuss a common reading from various angles requiring peer members to wear coats of discussion director, literary wizard, illustrator, passage picker, word wizard and summariser. The rotation of these roles is mandatory so that each peer member gets the opportunity to discover new patterns of meanings through different ways texts are created and deconstructed (Daniels, 2002). Alongside Pitman (1997), literary expert, Brock (1997, p.143), asserted the significance of LCs in L2 (second language) classes claiming that the varying backgrounds and ways of thinking of multicultural students added 'funds of knowledge' in meaning-making and negotiations to discussions. In similar vein, Ali (1993, p.288), affirmed LCs can be of 'no threat to learning environment in second language classroom because the reading circles concern with students' development as independent makers of meaning'.

If relevant, what aspects of theory did you draw on (cite relevant literature)?

The two theoretical frameworks that this study adopts, namely Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) sociocultural theory of learning and Krashen's (1988) theory of non-native language acquisition, reflect the inherent reading strategies that LCs put forth to promote reading. Both theories perceive students as 'an active member of a constantly changing community of learners in which knowledge constructs and is constructed by larger cultural systems' (Larson & Marsh, 2005, pp.100). As an active member of an ever-evolving community, students create meanings or understand information by interacting with others as part of their social system. This therefore implicates the needs for educators to connect literacy with students' lives and this is what LCs offer (Daniels, 2002). The school represents the cultural system for the students allowing them to interact with their peers in different ways such as nonverbal cues other than the face to face social exchanges.

LCs possess the ability to combine pertinent learning practices through discussion, culturally responsive texts or realias (bringing in authentic materials from real life to facilitate understanding of a studied topic in class). When students discuss their responses and listen to their peers' perspectives, they create an interpretive community in which the varying viewpoints leave a profound impact on

the students' experiences of a text (Lehman, 2007). From individually constructing meanings to socially negotiating these meanings before internalizing them, LCs engage students in reflective social exchanges that not only extend their views but also provide them with an authentic opportunity to involve with and wonder about texts (McElvain, 2010). Given that discussions in LCs are authentic, free-flowing and natural coupled with students' enthusiasm to dissect a reading text, the latter's affective filter is low, hence, there is no obstruction to language acquisition (Krashen, 1988). Further, the individual reading of the text alongside the natural conversation about the reading that follows in LCs expose students with the comprehensible input of the studied language that belongs to the level 'i+1', that is, the appropriate input for their existing linguistic competence.

LCs improve language development because they allow students to grasp the studied language in its natural order (Krashen, 1989). Since all peer members may not be on the same linguistic competence level, social exchanges among them have the ability to lead to the occurrences of true learning as the more knowledgeable peers, through scaffolded information, may help the struggling ones to reach to an increased level of understanding. LCs also create opportunities for students to grasp new vocabularies and use them in their discussions or they may even internalize new words by guessing out their meanings when they are constantly being used by their peers while discussing texts. The alignment of LCs with Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) sociocultural theory of learning and Krashen's (1988, 1989) theory on non-native language acquisition make the two aforestated theories the appropriate grounding for this study.

What was your inquiry/research question(s) or aims?

Does the use of literature circles and their inherent reading strategies enhance students' perceptions of their reading abilities?
The sub-questions were:
(1) Are literature circles successful on creating and increasing students' reading desire?
(2) Are literature circles an effective support for language development?

How did you expect change to happen?

I anticipated my informants to demonstrate visible signs of reading enjoyment and engagement in free-flowing, expressive, and constructive discussions in which they clearly articulated their literary and affective reactions to their reading. I wanted to see my informants diving into critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss and respond to texts and how this process shaped their perceptions of themselves as readers. Also, I was intrigued to discover the impacts literature circles had on the informants' language development and improvement given that I expected them to use a vast array of vocabulary and correct grammar in their discussions.

Inquiry plan and activities

This study drew information through three research tools and details of each are provided below:

1. Unstructured Observation

Twelve LCs were observed; instructional scaffoldings and reading texts were provided to the participants in the first four circles to acquaint them with LCs:

Acquainting phase/ Week	Assigned Reading	Genre	Source
One	The Pieter Both Mountain	Fiction	Kissoon-Etawaree(2012)
Two	Reap What You Sow	Myth	English for students (2018)
Three	The Tamarind Boy	Fiction	Bucktowar (2000)
Four	Bebbo	Fiction	Bhagheerutty (1997)

The participants' nonverbal cues were recorded and as from the third LC, they demonstrated capabilities of handling their own reading, hence, instructional scaffolding were gradually diminished. By the fifth circle, they selected their own readings:

Week	Chosen reading	Genre	Source
One	Le Morne	Fiction	Ramdoyal (2009)
Two	The Fisherman Trap (voler kazye)	Fiction	Ramdoyal (2009)
Three	My World Cup Souvenirs	Magazine article	L'express (2018)
Four	Singapore: A clear, Safe path leads to success	Travel-National Geographic	Buettner (2017)
Five	The Mission to save Africa's Okavango Delta	Travel- National Geographic	Buettner (2017)
Six	Leadership wisdom	Self-help (chapters 1-6)	Robin Sharma (1996)
Seven	Leadership wisdom	Self-help (chapters 7-12)	Robin Sharma (1996)
Eight	Who will cry when you die	Self-help	Robin Sharma (1999)

In the above self-selected reading situations, I was a background observer jotting cues in bullet points. The observational notes were then cross checked with the sound recorded LCs to ensure transparency in the transcription and analysis phases.

2. Reflective diaries (RDs)

This study chose RDs to supplement the observational data and sound recorded LCs with insights namely the participants' individual reflection on LCs, thoughts, and feelings which would otherwise been difficult to capture (Gardner, 2011). The participants' RDs were collected on the next day of each LC and recorded and analysed everything written in them with the latter's permissions. The participants' RDs acted as a form of an ongoing assessment indicating whether LCs were successful in gradually instilling a love of reading for pleasure in the twelfth grade boys and promoting the latter's language learning.

3. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Occurring at a subsequent stage of research, this inquiry tool involved the participants in a forty-five minutes' collective discussion wherein they discussed their reading experiences particularly how their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions changed throughout research and why they had such negative reading attitudes prior research. They also discussed reasons for their texts selection and how those texts impacted their lives and thinking. After initiating the discussion, I adopted a subtle role allowing the participants to voice out their thoughts, questions and build on each other's responses. However, at times, I intervened to prompt about their language learning and challenged them to elicit different perspectives about the discussed topic, for instance, how conscious were they about language errors and of using new words in their reading discussions.

The gathered data was studied in relation to Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis framework:
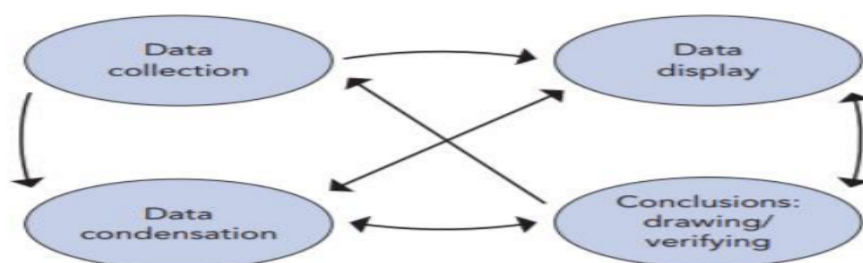
Ethical considerations and relationships

Approved and informed by the Ethical Research Guidelines and Policy of the University of Brighton, the three participants' rights, values, needs, and desires were respected throughout research. Voluntary informed consents were sought from the school, parents, and participants and the aforementioned figures were well informed orally and verbally of what they have agreed to. The oral explanation was done in MC in case the parents had difficulty in understanding English. The liberty of withdrawing at any time from research was given to the school, parents and participants and they were assured that the subjects will not be harmed in any possible way.

Anonymity and confidentiality of participants and the school were also maintained through the use of pseudonyms so that the data gathered could not be traced back to them. Stored securely in a password protected folder, the gathered data was used solely for research purposes and was not disclosed to a third party.

Findings

The findings revealed that LCs had exerted positive effects on the participants' reading desire, text analysis and language development and this is exemplified in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1: Participants' assertion in their RD9

'Pfff! I really really wanted to finish this book! Exams! Grrrrr!' (participant X)

'I can't leave this book man! Addicted?! Exams, why so near?' (participant Y)

'I am feeling bad! Exams! Why tomorrow?' (participant Z)

Excerpt 2: Participants' analytical engagement with their chosen text in LC12

Participant Y (Discussion Director): Who will cry when you die. Passage picker, which chapter have you selected?

Participant X (passage picker/literary wizard): (smiling ☺)Your favourite! The last one. As you said on Wednesday, this chapter sums the book (smiling ☺) and I find it interesting as it talks about happiness in a different way. It changes the way I see happiness. For me, happiness was being highly successful and living a big life! But he made me realise that happiness actually come from little things! When I think about it, he is right. He saved me from having a (*looking in his prepared notes*) backward life.

Participant Z (connector/Summariser): This book actually prevents us all from living a backward life. If we would not read, we would not meet this man! Think well. We would be as we were. Failing and in the future we would regret.

Participant Y: You are right. He explains this in detail. We should make our studies fun. We can do it and create our happiness by meeting our purpose. And what about the ending? I found the quote very powerful

Participant Z: I like it too. It (pause) actually makes you think about your life and plan it

Participant X: as if you have a control over your life not the contrary.

Participant Y: like we did, coming to school, pass the time and accepted our failures.

Participant X: Yes, we are not doing this now

Excerpt 3: Participants' assertions about language development in the FGD

'I learned many words for the last three months. More than what I wrote in my diary. Sometime, I said some words and then I realised that I myself did not know that I know these words (participant Z)

This happen to me as well. Last Wednesday in the discussion I say the word 'plethora' and I was shocked! I mean I have not use this word before and it was not in my diary as well. I think and think and then realise that maybe I read it in one of the books (participant Y)

I found this very interesting. For me, this was like a game. Remember I told you (pointing to participant Z) when I return home, I normally think about the discussion especially what I said and then I realised that sometime I say things, words, that I wrote in my diary but sometime I say words that I did not know that I know. I said that to my father and he told me to keep reading (participant X)

'and even the words that I wrote in my diary, I did not memorise them. I just used them two to three times in the discussion and pheeep! I remember them (participant Z)

During initial stages of research, that is prior LC1 and LC2, the participants were unwilling to read but their unwillingness turned into willingness to read as from LC3 to LC12 whereby they were observed to integrate their individual responses with their experiences to realise and structure textual meanings. They read from a resistant perspective establishing multiple connections across texts, ideas, experiences, questioned, reflected and then voiced out their reflections. This is illustrated in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 4: Participants' discussion in LC4

Participant Z (Discussion director): Without wasting time, I declare the discussion open

Participant X (passage picker): Bebbo and Kumar! Like Tefano, it is a bit like our everyday life. I've chosen the part where Kumar witnesses the burglary. I find this important because it is like what is happening in our society. Drugs, stealing, murder, rape, burglary, these are what we heard every day on the radio. Today, in the bus, I heard the driver telling a man that an old man has killed his wife because of money in front of his son's son.

Participant Z: grand-child, grand son

Participant X: Exactly. In front of his grand son

Participant Y (connector/literary wizard): Even I would choose the same part if I would be the passage picker today. Look around us. There is no security. Kumar witness the burglary. Remember, what happened at Rose Belle? We (pointing at participant Z) were discussing this yesterday. People just entered a house and start beating the family and stealing everything.

Participant Z: Mauritius is not safe! The government is not doing enough. Why not introducing death punishment?

Participant X: My father always say that. Death penalty would reduce crime

Participant Y: Yes, I agree. But if innocent are killed? Remember, the story Mr. A (referring to their sociology teacher) tell us, the man who was proved innocent after he was killed..

Participant X: Ohh yeah! Point!

Participant Z: and in our country we always hear stories about police being involved in crimes, drugs

Participant Y: They were the one who have to protect the society. We cannot trust them.

The above excerpts ultimately showcased that LCs were effective in promoting the participants' responses to pleasure reading. They viewed reading as inherently social, multifaceted and an interconnected process of literacy that tapped on their development and improvement of cognitive, social and affective skills. They demonstrated preferences to read local fictions in LC4 and LC5 but their reading discussion focused largely on their rapport with the protagonists and their contexts. They brought reality to the text discussion and this was what had been observed to fuel their reading desire. Newspaper, travel magazine geography and self-help were the reading genres opted by the

participants as from LC7 to LC 12. The de and reconstruction of ideas and their self-identities in light to what they read was also underlined and this is typified below:

Excerpt 5: Participants' assertions in LC10

Participant X (literary wizard/connector): We can be. Warriors at school. Not like we were before, but warriors in learning… as Julian says… with no limits.

Participant Z: Definitely. We need to link paycheck to purpose! That's the secret code (smiling ☺). We need to get ourselves in err (looking in his prepared notes) focused actions.

Participant Y: We can have this as our purpose each day then. Enjoying whatever we do and learn at school. And if ever we do not understand, we can discuss it here. We will help each other. Like Julian helped Peter.

Participant Z (smiling ☺) Definitely. We will invest in this purpose every day and reap our effort next year for our final exams.

The narratives particularly as from LC8 to LC12 intrinsically inspired the participants to be more responsible by owning their learning and role as students. In line with the twelve reading circles, the participants' RDs and their involvement in the FGD underscored LC alongside its inherent strategies to have enhanced their reading abilities particularly their reading comprehension, vocabulary, sentence formation, critical reasoning, spelling and fluency skills. The study also evidenced that the activation and sustainability of Dewey's pleasure of play was significant for the participants to find thrill in their reading and return to its pattern.

Another contributor to sustain playfulness in reading was that the participants' individual reading was followed by the peer-discussion which kept their ZPD in motion and with the right scaffolds received from their peers or jottings in their RDs, they engaged in higher order thinking to acquire new knowledge which casted away confusion and unleashed their creativity and criticality in a low anxiety environment. As demonstrated, the participants, irrespective of deliberate teaching, acquired effortlessly language skills. Grammar precision and literal translation from MC to English were however noted.

Post research, LCs could be said to have enhanced the self-efficacies of the participants who were visibly seen to enjoy reading. This study, as highlighted by the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996, pp.32), evidenced that LCs embodied educational qualities and when are employed by teachers, the latter are bringing out the best in their students' day by day'.

Changes to practice

Post research, I translated the disclosed findings into practice; I embedded the sociocultural teaching techniques in my integrated English lessons and allocated a period from my timetable to LC, that is, a slot where students discuss their selected texts in light of the LC roles and responsibilities they choose for themselves. Post this task, I ask them to present an abridgement of their discussion to the class at the end of which queries from their peers and I are put forth to elicit more information or fuel their thinking.

Reflective evaluation on the process

This study implicates the need to forge new lines of enquiry in regards to how pleasure, playfulness and seriousness can be concurrently manifested during teaching and learning processes. Further, this study considers implications for pedagogical practices that enrich reading experiences for the diverse emerging masculine reading identities in countries like Mauritius where the absence of pleasure reading is underlined in educational policies and institutions.

This suggests the inclusion of a literary policy which dedicates time slots for pleasure reading in schools. Implications also include the centrality of having a more sophisticated knowledge base about the impacts, impediments and varying experiences of boys as readers at school and in society.

More research on the implementation of the sociocultural theory in EFL reading classrooms is also implicated alongside the need for teacher-training to acquaint teachers about LC and its inherent strategies.

Next steps

I intend to conduct similar research but on a longitudinal basis and with a larger sample size including students from secondary schools in different zones in Mauritius

References

Ali, S. (1993). The reader-response approach: An alternative for teaching literature in a second language. *Journal of Reading*, 37, 288-296.

Brock, C. H. (1997). Exploring the use of book club with second-language learners in mainstream classrooms. In I. S. McMahon, T. E. Raphael, V. J. Goatley, & L. S. Pardo (Eds.), *The book club connection,* pp. 141-158. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University

Daniels, H. (1994). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in the student-centered classroom. York,* ME: Stenhouse

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. Portland, Stenhouse

Gardner, H. (2011) Intelligence, Creativity, Ethics: Reflections on my evolving research interests, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 55(4), 302-304

International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English. (1996), '*Standards for the English language arts'*.Urbana, IL: NCTE, pp.32.

Krashen, S. (1988). 'Free reading and the development of literacy'. In Hyman and Li (eds), *Language, Speech and Mind: Studies in Honour of Victoria A.Fromkin*, UK: Croom Helm, pp. 224-238

Krashen, S. (1989). 'We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis', *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol, 73, pp. 440-464

Larson & Marsh (2005). *Making Literacy Real: Theories and Practices for Learning and Teaching*. London: Sage

Lehman, B., (2007). *Children's literature and learning*. New York: NY: Teachers College Press.

McElvain, C. (2010). Transactional literature circles and the reading comprehension of English learners in the mainstream classroom. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 33(2), 1 Pitman, M. (1997). *Literature circles.* ERIC ED 416 50378-205. doi:10.1111

Miles and Huberman. (1994) *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd edition), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Pitman, M. (1997). *Literature circles*. ERIC ED 416 503

Reisman, R. (1994). Leaving out to pull in: Using reader response to teach multicultural literature. *English Journal*, 83 (2), 20-23

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press

Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and language (E. Hanfmann & G. Vakar, Trans.),* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

About Camtree

Camtree: the Cambridge Teacher Research Exchange is a global platform for close-to-practice research in education. Based at Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge, Camtree draws on high-quality research from around the world to support educators to reflect on their practice and carry out inquiries to improve learning in their own classrooms and organisations. The outcomes of these inquiries, once peer reviewed, can be published within the Camtree digital library under a Creative Commons Licence (CC-BY 4.0). You can find out more about Camtree and its digital library at www.camtree.org.