

Exploring Life Experiences through Literature Circles

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This article informs on some insights about pupils' reading engagements through literature circles and the way those circles can be implemented in the classrooms. Such practices are based upon students' life experiences in order to construct new understandings about life itself as well as to foster reflection, providing students with the opportunity of playing an active role in their language learning decision-making.

Key words: Reading Engagements, Literature Circles, Life Experiences

Este artículo presenta algunos discernimientos acerca de prácticas de lectura realizadas a través de círculos literarios y la forma en que estos círculos pueden ser implementados en las aulas de clase. Dichos círculos se basan en las experiencias de vida de los estudiantes con el fin de construir conocimiento acerca de la vida misma y de igual forma fomentar la reflexión, brindándoles la oportunidad de jugar un papel más activo en la toma de decisiones acerca del aprendizaje del lenguaje.

Palabras claves: Prácticas de Lectura, Círculos Literarios, Experiencias de Vida

Introduction

Just a few years ago, one could be considered a good reader only if the reading exercise was done fluently. Reading was just a set of activities to comprehend print rather than the meanings. It rarely meant making sense of people's lives and worlds. Then, when the need to make some changes was seen and teachers realized reading could be more than a purely instructional activity, it was thought that one of the first strategies to start change was to provide students with opportunities to read. The intention was to see learners reading something. However, giving students the chances to increase the amount of reading does not guarantee students will become literate readers who think critically and reflectively. (Short, Harste and Burke, 1996, pp 170).

Reading engagements must allow children's voices to come out. Students' voices acknowledge their own understanding, the connections they make, their attitudes, their opinions, their perceptions and their experiences. Students' voices illuminate comprehension as part of an active learning and re-learning process. The intention is to make them aware of the fact that their voices count inside the classroom as part of their educational process. Indeed, students' reading engagements have to be connected to children's life experiences (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996). To establish a connection between their experiences and what they read, students should be exposed to a variety of readings, having the option to choose what they want to read making sense of both experiences and reading texts.

The act of reading is worthless if learners do not find a connection between what they read and what they actually live. Every time we find ourselves in front of a text, we realize it is loaded with the authors' backgrounds, ideas, thoughts, beliefs, etc. Reading is not a mere act of decodification anymore; therefore, it cannot be accomplished without establishing connections. According to Freire (1987) "reading does not consist only in decoding the written word of language; rather, it is preceded and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. "The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context" (p.21). Then, whenever a student approaches a reading text, this reading is complemented and enriched with the student's knowledge of the world. Consequently, it implies encouraging English as a foreign language (EFL) in students by bringing their prior experiences about the world that surrounds them into the classroom.

Experiences that are connected to the reading of a text; in this case, the reading of literature texts empowers or disempowers readers' reflexivity. When we mention life experiences, it is of paramount importance to clarify that this concept is understood not only as the relation to what students live and exchange with other members of

their immediate communities but also as the interaction with the world itself in its simplest way. It means everything that surrounds students, what they see, feel, touch, hear, etc. Every social act presents them with the challenge to learn and even to re-learn. That is why knowledge is socially constructed; every person has prior knowledge that, shared with others, is complemented and enriched to grow together.

Providing spaces to read and discuss is a good point of departure, but it is still not enough to consider it an innovation inside the classroom. New perspectives in education advocate students to have an active role in the decision-making of their own learning processes, to have them as participants rather than subjects. Students should be encouraged to say what they want to learn and how they want it to be, since they are the ones who know what is really significant for them. Collecting ideas from students contributes to the negotiation of a more equal teaching-learning interaction. Consequently, reading engagements do not make the difference; learners should have the opportunity to choose from a variety of options which they must find both challenging and supportive since, when they are reading "hard" books they develop new reading skills and the act of engaging in conversations provides opportunities to make sense of what they are reading. One of the main purposes of reading engagements is that students read for enjoyment. They do not necessarily have to learn about the language when they read. It can be an implicit result of these readings, but the main goal of this type of activities is to encourage students to read articulating both life experiences and schooling in order to gain new understandings.

This is what Halliday (1985) in Short, K. (2002) calls learning through language. He explains the activity of learning through language as related to reading as a way of learning about the world and one's self through dialogue and response to literature. Students go beyond literacy skills to think deeply and critically about their reading by taking an intense look at meaning and connection through collaborative dialogue as they engage in reading books which invite multiple interpretations.

Indeed, this idea given by Halliday provides an explanation of what literature circles can achieve in the classroom, when they are well developed and pursue a relevant purpose in order to gain readers-adepts who are able to reflect and connect what they read with what they know about the world.

What do we mean by literature circles?

Halliday's assumption is the starting point to explain what literature circles are and how they work in the classroom. Literature circles involve students in expanding and critiquing their understandings about their reading through dialo-

gue with other readers (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996). This definition of literature circles relates to the reading transaction discussed by Rosenblatt (1978) who explains reading is a process in which readers actively construct understandings by bringing meaning to as well as taking meaning from a text. It is a reciprocal process in which teachers do not ask for the same response to the book. Instead, the more differences that come out, the more productive the circles are. Students enter this world of literature circles to learn about their lives and make sense of those experiences and feelings.

Students engage in dialogues during the literature circles which lead to new perspectives on texts, life and the reading process itself. These dialogues empower students to listen to others carefully and acknowledge their voices; comments are valued because they are grounded in diversity and pluralist ideas.

According to Freire (1987) in Hubbard R. And Miller, B., dialogue must be understood as a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more critically communicative beings (pp 97-119). In other words, the dialogues in which students take part during the circles are just expanding the opportunities for a barely done historical characteristic of human beings in which they meet to reflect on their realities and to have the chance to make it and remake it, in this case supported by the reading of literature.

How do literature circles work?

One of the main concerns dealing with literature circles is how to start them. Bearing in mind the importance of listening to students' voices and giving them the opportunity to choose, one could consider the first thing to do would be to establish the knowledge base they have in terms of reading. Asking them is the easiest way to start inquiring. Once you know what type of approach they have had to literature and how willing they are to participate in the circles you can start shaping your circles depending on learners' needs and interests.

As it was mentioned earlier, one of the key aspects is giving students the chance to choose what to read from a variety of options. Sometimes it can be done from a huge amount of possibilities, or it can be limited to a set of books for literature circles. The literature used in the circles should be supportive enough to generate good discussions; even good stories do not stand alone. Therefore, it is through experiences that discussions are enlightened.

To select the readings, teachers must bear in mind students' previous experiences with literature and how they approached it before. Teachers can present a variety of activities to inquire about their interests and expectations on the kind of readings

they intend to do. One activity they can develop is a comparison chart in which they comment on their past readings and the ones they would like to know from now on. This type of activity is supportive for both teachers and students because it scans students' previous experiences and scaffolds their own learning interests. Besides, this activity is relevant to the development of the circles as it is connected to and builds up from students. Then, students group according to their interests in order to lead to a decision and set the book they wish to read.

Once they select the book, reading activities take place inside the classroom. Thus, reading strategies come to play an important role in the development of literature circles. At the beginning, stories can be read by the teacher who acts as a facilitator and provides the spaces to make students feel comfortable with these practices; once students feel ready, they start making the readings by themselves. Different types of reading can be accomplished during the circles. One of the most common modes of reading is reading aloud which can be performed by both teachers and students. Although it can develop an interest in reading, it can also be challenging for students who do not feel comfortable with language performance.

A suggestion to break the ice as soon as the circles initiate is to provide open-ended questions designed to connect both literature and students' lives. These types of questions also empower students to think deeply about the book and establish connections with their lives.

The following questions are taken from Harste & Short (1998):

- Who is the main character of the story?
- What kind of person is the character?
- How do you know?
- Is this story like any other story you have read or watched?
- What are the main ideas behind the story?
- What makes you think of them as you read the story?

These questions enhance the content from the reader's perspective. In this way, knowledge is assimilated through connections readers establish as they build on what the others say. Again, different opinions and understandings are welcomed since it is diversity that most enriches the literature circles.

Likewise, there are many more activities to be done within a literature circle which are possible to enrich a way to learn the language, a way to learn the content, a way to critique the world, or a way of knowing about the world. (Short, Harste,

and Burke, 1996 pp201) It depends on the interests that students and teachers have to be explored.

Literature circles force students to cope with others' ideas and interpretations as they listen to each other. This is a difficult exercise for them and they will have to struggle with the idea of a simple story dealing with more complex topics and to discuss during the circles as others' opinions might be a bit more complex than theirs. These complexities will eventually change them as readers and thinkers. Therefore, reading engagements will help them become more independent, as learners, due to the way they approach a reading once they have experienced the circles. A third-grade female student who participated in a literature circle reported in a study done by Harste & Short (1996) shows the way the circle activated and changed her eyesight and brain. Findings reaffirm how reflection allows students to become aware of their own changes as they take the time to think deeply not only about the content, but also about the way they shape their cognitive abilities during the circles. Strategies to facilitate self-monitoring reflective processes are learning logs and journals. Jeroski, Brownly & Kaser (1990) et al. recommend using learning logs and journals in the following ways:

- To record key ideas from a book or a reading
- To make predictions about what will happen next in a story
- To record questions
- To reflect on the information presented
- To connect the ideas presented to other subject areas or to the students' personal lives
- To respond to questions posed by the teacher or other students

These tools have taken an active role inside reflective classrooms. On the one hand, logs are usually short and more objective than journals and are used to record aspects of a class, observations of an experiment or do homework assignments. Whatever logs are used for, their responses are brief, impersonal and factual.

On the other hand, journals are usually written in a narrative form, and are used to express opinions, feelings, anecdotes, impressions and anything more subjective than a log. Journals are used to respond to a reading or a book, to comment reactions to an event or to reflect about experiences or feelings connected to what is being studied in a class or outside the classroom. Whatever these tools are used for, they provide teachers and students with opportunities to learn, reflect and

monitor themselves in any purpose they deal with. The more these activities are done, the more complex their reflections are, as the participants acquire new understandings through the real use of literature, inserting other activities which transform those reading experiences into significant events.

In short, what has been discussed above can be described as a reflective reading cycle in which literature circles become a single component seeking to enable the empowerment of students' reflections beyond literacy skills. What follows is a diagram clarifying this reflective reading cycle and describing the real purpose reading engagements we are looking forward to accomplishing in the classroom.

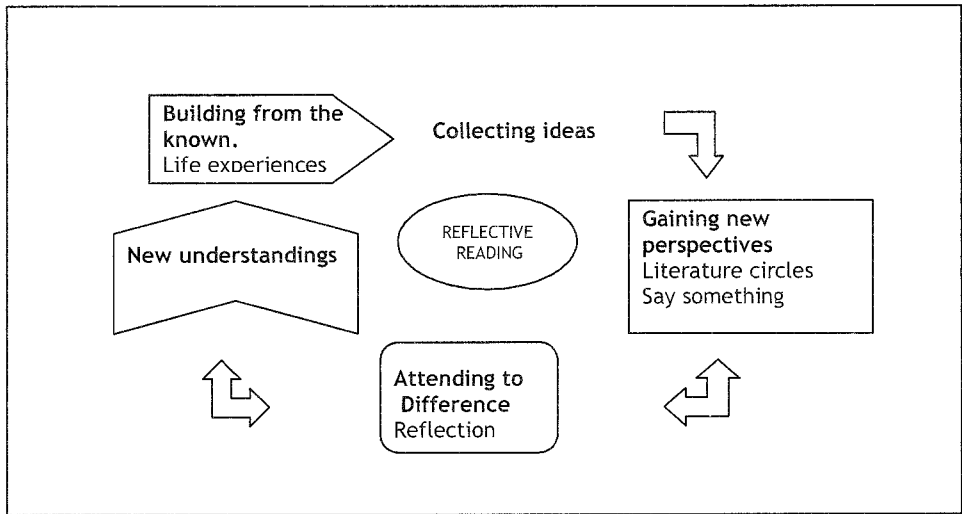


Diagram 1. *Reflecting reading cycle. Adapted from Short et al. (1996).*

Indeed, the previous sketch informs us about the way knowledge is constructed building up from the known, i.e from students' life experiences which are the main characteristic to adopt when referring to literacy practices which, in this case, are the literature circles in which reading takes place. In that sense, students will really establish the connection between what is being taught at schools and what their actual lives are.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is needless to say how necessary it is to provide spaces in which students can reflect, discuss and express their beliefs about life itself. Therefore, the

more opportunities they have to analyze themselves and the world that surrounds them, the more reflective they become. This statement is in accordance with Freire (1987) when he states that we first read our worlds and then we read the words. As a result, schooling is not an isolated process which needs to be accomplished only at schools where students go to be filled with concepts and skills. Rather, they socially and significantly construct their own knowledge based on experiences valued by both teachers and peers since everything coming from them is valid as humans and learners.

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