

## **College Students' Perceptions about Literature Circles for Learning English as a Foreign Language**

### **Percepción de los Estudiantes de Universidad sobre el Uso de Círculos de Lectura en el Aprendizaje del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera.**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports students' perceptions about reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through the use of literature circles. This case study was applied in a setting with 74 participants who attended English classes level 1, from Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo - Morona Santiago campus, during the academic period October 2017 – March 2018. Data was collected through a survey validated by experts at the end of the period and 20 students were selected at random to complete it. Students were challenged to read the material available in their English texts. Also, students completed different roles on the ongoing process, so they provided information to reach conclusions from different perspectives focusing on the positive and negative aspects of this technique to learn English. The results of the study demonstrated that students noticed that their grammar and vocabulary knowledge increased. Also, they practiced more speaking skills when reporting the allotted roles. As a conclusion, implementing reading through literature circles can help students to develop their reading and speaking skills in English, and going beyond it helped to increase vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

Keywords: Reading strategies, vocabulary improvement, speaking skills, English language learning

## Introduction

Improving critical thinking skills, developing vocabulary and getting knowledgeable about the surrounded world are among the best benefits of reading. This is developed at early ages when children attend kindergarten. Besides, teachers have been working on reading skills, testing different techniques, but Ecuadorian students still struggle and can't get used to integrate the habit of reading. Criollo (2017) considers that the percentage (43%) of Ecuadorian readers is not valuable compared to Chileans who read 5.4 books per year instead of half of just one as Ecuadorians does.

Since 2017 there has been a great interest in implementing reading habits in literacy; that's why it has been published the National Book and Reading Plan, in order to encourage people to read and be more critical (Telégrafo, 2017). Students should read more frequently to be aware of the importance of reading and teachers should encourage them by teaching the techniques about how to read properly and analyze a text as it's their purpose and commitment as a professional.

The current paper is at the center of English language teaching at universities. It is essential to mention that before attending the university, The Ecuadorian curriculum map is based on the importance of the English subject as a learning process starting from kindergarten till college. As per the Department of Education directives, the high school English level should be B1; however, this is still one of the most striking issues for an Ecuadorian student. The Ecuadorian English national curriculum is based on a language-driven Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach integrating five curricular threads: communication and cultural awareness, oral communication, reading, writing, and language through the arts. (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016). This means that students, at the end of their curriculum, will be able to speak and write about daily situations that are familiar or personal interest. In addition, students should learn how to read a text of interest and understand the main idea about it. At this point, it is fundamental to mention that reading is an essential skill that teachers must lingered on and make it a leading activity since the beginning of literacy.

Likewise, Ecuadorian universities require a certain English level, so that students are

most of the times forced to improve their English skills. According to González and Castro (2017), today Ecuadorian universities are focused on a developmentally point of view related to English learning. Actually, learners are required to get a B2 Certificate in order to graduate. Reasons for these standards are due to the main purpose of getting an International Certificate (proficiency level) thanks to a long, intense and rigorous process of learning.

Trying to teach and improve English reading skills as a second language, could be challenging sometimes since the way each student learn a foreign language is different. For instance, some students can take advantage of some specific techniques, but others don't even know how to apply them and don't take the opportunity to improve their skills and reach their goal. As well, according to Nachmani (2015), a foreign language acquisition throughout a reading process can be affected by many factors such as the language exposure, vocabulary knowledge, social attitudes and models. Students are surrounded by all of the mentioned factors, but the most important finding of the research consists in cultural differences which affect reading acquisition in an EFL context. English teachers not only have to force students to read, but they have to consider all factors affecting language acquisition in reading skills and implement the correct strategy. According to Macalister (2014), one of the possible methods is to pay a particular attention to the reading comprehension rather than reading to learn and review grammar rules. The main purpose of teaching reading techniques must be clear instructions, mark out the goal of the lesson and the conditions to follow. Students must be the center of the lesson and have to understand and be able to catch the main content of the reading without using a dictionary, but using simple learned techniques.

A survey conducted by Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index demonstrated that Ecuador is in place 55 out of 80 countries. According to this evaluation, the English level in Ecuador is low (Heredia, 2017). The development of national strategies have been designed in order to have a clear vision of the expectations of teaching English in Ecuador. In-service English teachers need a B2 English level based on the Common European Framework (CEF) of reference for languages learning, teaching and assessment to work (Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador, 2014). Until 2025 students have to reach a level B1 at the end of third bachillerato following the schedule that began in 2016 and will finish in the academic year in 2025 (Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador, 2017). However, according to Cronquist and Fiszbein (2017) the implementation of a national strategy for English language learning is not being applied at all. They mention that the actions are imprecise. In a comparison made among other Latin American countries, the progress indicators chart shows that in Ecuador English learning is mandatory. However, it also indicates that there is a little advance in study programs, curriculum, and evaluation support. In other words, a number of key issues arise from English language learning and teaching in Ecuador because it is not articulated in aspects such as learning strategies, skills development, teachers' preparation and students' cultural backgrounds which are not considered at all in all the levels of curriculum. Also, considering that a lot of students attend university after finishing high school, they will keep learning English and the problems probably will continue since techniques and strategies were not learned before. Reading in a foreign language is also a skill used and applied when learning English at university. Norton (2007) states that "reading instruction is to develop the ability to read fluently with rapid word recognition and comprehension." (p. 245). Students, on the other hand, must read to develop their literacy skills. As stated by Farris, Fuhler and Walther (2004), literacy is a skill where students read and understand others' written ideas and then writing over based on that information and spreading thoughts or concepts to an audience. (Farris, Fuhler & Walther, 2004, p. 5).

Incidentally, teachers must not forget that reading in one's first language can be transferred when acquiring a second language. In a study about word recognition conducted by Durgunoğlu, Nagy, and Hancin-Bhatt (1993) demonstrated that children who have reading strengths and phonological awareness in their first language can perform well when learning English language. It is eminent that English teachers have to instruct learners about reading strategies that will help them comprehend texts and then communicate their ideas in a critical way. However, it is also essential to know how well students can read in their first language in order to apply strategies in the English reading class.

Reading strategies used by the teachers will depend on the needs, materials, and goals of the curriculum. The gist of the matter is that teachers must encourage and motivate students to read and reach the standards considering cultural backgrounds, needs, and individual differences. Additionally, teachers have to understand that students with poor reading strategies backgrounds will not work correctly even though the teacher is using the correct reading teaching approach. A study developed in an EFL setting where students reading strategies were not aligned correctly or students did not acquire them yet demonstrated that their reading procedures and metacognition influenced in their comprehension of texts and tasks. Learners who had a high reading proficiency level performed better in reading in English as a foreign language because they were able to report their understanding easily (Jun Zhang, 2001, p. 283-284).

Reading is one tested skill in standardized test. As stated by Farris, Fuhler and Walther (2004), students do not only have to read. They have to go further. After reading, they have to do something with the knowledge they have acquired after reading. Also, they have to develop their critical thinking, solve problems, and become good communicators. Being literate in this new era involves different aspects that not only include reading. Students have to be more critical and go further the activities and practices given in a class. For this reason, students apart from reading, need to understand and comprehend information from texts to accomplish tasks which will reflect their own understanding. The question arises when English teachers call on a variety of instructional strategies to bring into practice those metacognitive skills and strategies like the literature circles probably is the answer. Furr (2003) mentions that "EFL Literature Circles are fun, focused classroom-based student reading and discussion groups which naturally combine the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening" (p. 1).

Literature circles is a strategy that teachers can use during the English teaching process owing to the great amount of vocabulary a student can acquire and the improvement of reading comprehension. As claimed by Furr (2003), using literature circles in an English foreign language (EFL) context promotes a student-centered learning, language skills development, cooperative learning, and enjoyment. There has been different studies about using literature circles where English is taught as a Foreign language and the results have demonstrated that literature circles encourage students' participation, collaboration, improvement of reading comprehension (Calzada, 2013; Fredricks, 2012; Burns, 1998) Also, literature circles can be used in a class where students with special needs are included without major accommodations and students denoted a great improvement on their reading skills (Blum, Lipsett, & Yocom, 2002). In this study, learners' perceptions about the use of literature circles are discussed. The aim was to know how the students felt about reading and discussing ideas in groups. Also, it mentions the aspects that participants consider as enhanced while working with this strategy.

## Materials and Methods

The use of literature circles in a class includes previous preparation and explanation of the activities and roles. There are different roles that students have to complete in advance in order to discuss about the reading in class. All the roles are important and have a purpose. Burns (1998) states that students can choose their role; however, to conduct this study, it was required to organize participants in groups of 5 students and they had a different role every week. Shelton-Strong (2011) considers that small groups of a maximum of 6 participants are good to keep talking. For this reason, the groups were integrated by 5 participants and the roles varied each week; so, at the end they will be able to provide their perceptions of all the roles not only about their preferred one.

The study was conducted during eight weeks. Participants were from English class level 1 and there was a total of 74 students. In each week, they had to read a text chosen from the text *Jetstream Elementary level CEFR A1/A2*. The reading activity was developed at home with a pace of one week for each reading. After that, two hours were assigned in classes to report their roles and debate their ideas and thoughts. The roles were vocabulary whiz, questions master, favorite finder, artist, and summarizer. As it is illustrated, the roles are designed to encourage students to discuss and produce language more than just reading without a purpose.

When students ask and answer questions they are just demonstrating their understanding. Shelton-Strong (2011) remarks that communicative competence is reached when learners are involved in discussions. Furthermore, Macalister (2014) mentions that comprehension questions are challenging and those questions help teachers to check how students are understanding the text. All reading lessons have to focus on practice reading and understanding how to read.

The instructor provided the directions at the beginning of the activity and during the reading process helped to solve students' concerns. Shelton-Strong (2011) states that the teacher is just an observer and learners have the responsibility for interaction and it is a learned-centered activity. However, it was important to clarify and describe each role. In addition, students were able to download the role sheet from a Literacy Solution web page. This material is available for free, and students can access at any time. It also contains a brief description of each role.

At the end of the eight weeks, a focus group was selected to be part of this case study. 20 students were selected at random and they were between 20 and 24 years old; 13 female and 7 male. The main goal was to examine students' perceptions about the use of literature circles. Participants completed a survey and were interviewed. They also facilitated their thoughts about the benefits and problems they found out during the strategy development. The information was analyzed and codified according to participants' responses in order to understand the results and get conclusions based on the following questions that helped to apply a semi structured interview (See Table 1).

**Table 1 (semi structured questions to use during the interview)**

1. Mention at least three advantages of participating in literature circles in an English class
2. Mention at least three disadvantages of participating in literature circles in an English class
3. How has your vocabulary knowledge, grammar, speaking, writing, reading comprehension, and motivation increased?

Note. These questions were elaborated by the authors

## Results

Students' opinions reveal that literature circles as a strategy to develop reading skills has not only influenced on their vocabulary knowledge, but also it has affected other language skills. Participants mention that there are more advantages than disadvantages (see figure 1).

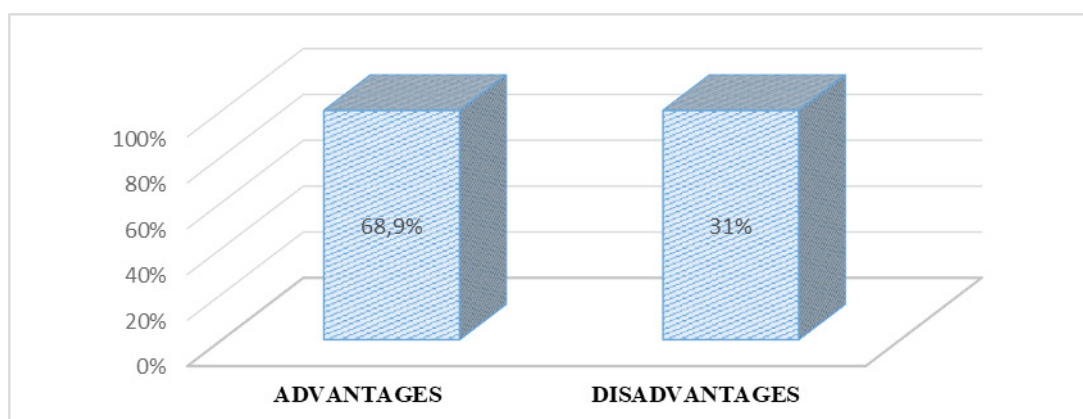


Fig. 1. Students' perceptions about advantages and disadvantages of using literature circles in an English class.

Students' answers were compared and the results demonstrated that there is a 68.9% of advantages and 31% are the disadvantages. In other words, participants express more positive points about using literature circles as a strategy to develop reading skills. However, it is necessary to consider the negative points which is about 31% of students' answers that concluded in general as useless.

The advantages cited by the 20 students have been categorized in order to understand students' assumptions (see Figure 2). Researchers also guided participants to provide information by ranking the ideas as high, intermediate and low improvement. Among the advantages, participants mentioned that they improved their grammar and vocabulary knowledge mostly. For instance, one student mentioned "This strategy helped me to practice speaking and I learned new words and also I understand the verbs in the past, but I can say that I did not read all the texts because I was not responsible at all." The student's answer help to understand and codify benefits and drawbacks.

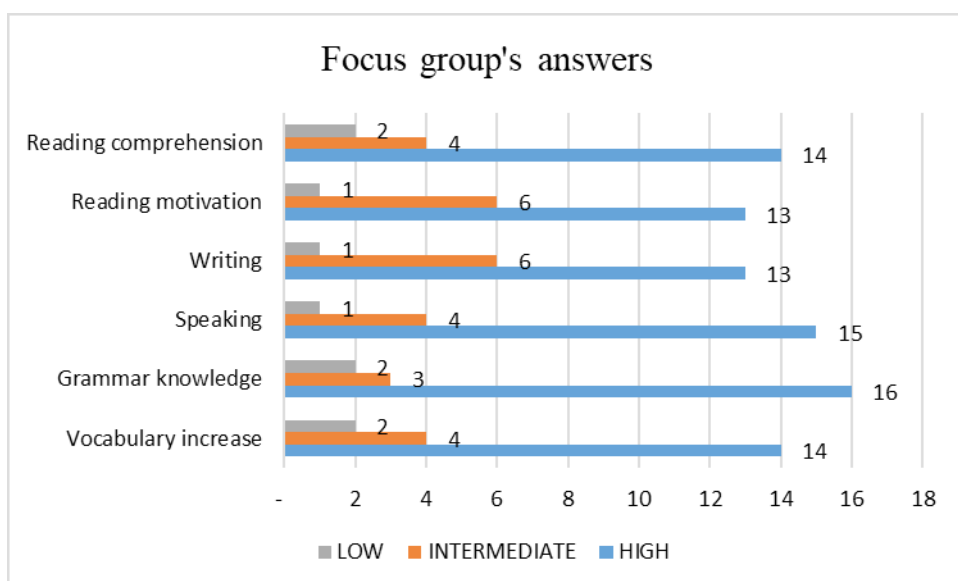


Fig. 2. Focus group's answers connected and codified.

Participants suggest that literature circles helped them to interact and develop speaking skills during the group activities. One student stated “this activity promoted participation and discussion among students. Also it increased the writing practice and dialogues in English.”

On the other hand, students have also mentioned that the readings were not interesting. As the teacher used the available resources in the book, this situation probably influenced that students did not enjoy the reading activity. As stated by Shelton-Strong (2011), scholars are motivated when they select their own reading texts. Furthermore, participants acknowledge that some readings were too long and they felt the necessity of using a translator. One participant stated that “students do not like reading and they feel a dissatisfaction when they are reading.” This assumption probably is related with their lack of reading skills in their first language. As stated by Karim (2010) reading abilities in language 1 is transferred to a second language acquisition.

In addition, the disadvantages include a lack of interest about the task and students' low motivation. Another issue to consider is that students struggle with vocabulary knowledge and some members of the group were not responsible with the role assigned for the week. To put in other words, participants did not accomplish the task correctly and probably this led them to conceive negative benefits of this strategy.

## Conclusions

Reading as a skill to increase English language learning has to be seen as a fundamental part of the English classes. English teachers have to verify how well they are using strategies to help learners understand texts and achieve the learning goals. However, it is crucial to consider that reading ability in students' first language can be transferred to a second language learning as mentioned by Chuang, Joshi and Dixon (2012) in a study conducted in an EFL context. In other words, reading strategies in Spanish are a strong resource to help students to read in English.

Literature circles in an English class where students with different backgrounds are learning a foreign language have helped them to increase their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Also, reading and reporting ideas through the use of roles encourage students to promote communication using the target language. This strategy has a potential benefit to create a safe environment to help undergraduates express their ideas inside the group, regardless of their mistakes in pronunciation or language use. Understanding the benefits of this strategy as a way of working with college students, teachers can apply and modify according to the context and students' backgrounds because needs and language learning motivation may differ in other places.



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