



# Literature circles: fun, creative and meaningful

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describes an innovative approach to reading.

## Introduction

ELT in high schools in China is still exam oriented despite several rounds of education reforms for more competence-oriented goals since the early 2000s. The curriculum mainly serves to prepare students for the university entrance examination, known as *Gaokao*. Correspondingly, ELT in high schools focuses mostly on students' grammar and vocabulary.

However, it has been clearly stated in the 'New Curriculum Standard for High School English Education' (MoE, 2018) that the curriculum aims to help students lay a solid foundation for continuous English learning and life-long development by nurturing four key competences: language ability, cultural consciousness, thinking qualities and learning skills. Evidently,

the current exam-oriented ELT does not serve this purpose very well.

Against such a backdrop, high school English teachers have adopted new teaching approaches in ELT classrooms, striving to develop students' key competencies while maintaining students' grammar and vocabulary learning as the highlight. Among the new approaches, one of the most popular and effective for teaching literature is called 'Literature circles' (LCs): a fun, creative and meaningful way to engage students fully in their ELT classrooms.

## What is an LC?

LCs are a type of classroom activity for literary reading. The first book to introduce LCs in a systematic way was written by Harvey Daniels (1994), in which

he suggested the use of a role sheet. Later, in the second edition of this book (Daniels, 2002), this sheet fully specified four basic roles (Connector, Questioner, Passage master / Literary luminary and Illustrator) and four optional roles (Summariser, Researcher, Vocabulary enricher / Word wizard, Travel tracer / scene setter). LCs have also been named 'Reading circles' by Mark Furr (2007) and the original roles changed to six roles (Discussion leader, Summariser, Connector, Word master, Culture collector and Passage person).

Different roles represent different tasks students would tackle with the literary texts. Teachers could adopt and adapt the roles mentioned above and create their own role sheet for their LCs, personalising their approach to teaching literature in their own ELT classrooms. As Daniels (2006:11) points out, LCs could be 'adopted, adapted, modified and personalised' by teachers to make the most out of a literature class.

In terms of their effectiveness for literature teaching, LCs have proved to be incredibly doable and sustainable classroom activities, contributing to students' falling in love with literature. By 2006, it is estimated that millions of students in the USA have experienced LCs (Daniels, 2006). They provide 'successful paradigms for supporting students' engagement with fixed texts' (Casey, 2008:292). The technique is regarded as a 'reliable, successful instructional approach' by teachers having tried it in the classroom (DaLie, 2001:98).

## An example of LCs in ELT

I adopted the role sheet proposed by Mark Furr (2011) in my ELT classroom, since I felt that it offered a clearer explanation of each role and detailed instructions regarding the responsibility of each role. It would be easier for my students to get the hang of the activity without much struggling.

My students were in Grade Two, and I used an excerpt from *Pygmalion* as the literary text from their textbooks (published for high school English education by People's Education Press) to demonstrate how LCs could be used for literature teaching and learning.

Therefore, through LCs, the four key competences were realised: language ability, cultural consciousness, thinking qualities and learning skills.

### Step 1: forming groups

For group forming, I divided my 54 students into six groups based on their own free choice: nine in each group. Since there were only six roles, three roles had to be played twice in each group. I chose Connector, Word master and Culture collector as the three repeated roles, since they were more directly in line with the goal to nurture students' key competencies as mentioned above.

### Step 2: introducing LCs

I handed out the role sheets for my students to read, explained how LCs worked and answered questions to clarify the responsibility of each role. The benefits of LCs were also revealed to the students, increasing their interest more in participating, as well as implicitly urging them to take this activity seriously: never lose a good chance to learn.

### Step 3: role taking

After all students were clear about LCs and each of the six roles, they were directed to work in a group to divide the roles among themselves. I was available to give suggestions when students could not decide which role they should play. Once all roles were taken within a group and each student in the group knew their tasks, students were invited to create a sign for their role for easier identification in the coming discussion and presentation.

### Step 4: reading and analysing the literary text

Students were then instructed to read the excerpt from *Pygmalion* in the textbook thoroughly, preparing notes as specified by their role in the LC. During their reading, they could get assistance from their teammates and dictionaries, as well as the teacher.

### Step 5: discussing and summarising

At this stage, students were encouraged to start their discussion of the literary text based on the notes they had taken down according to their role. The student who played the role 'Discussion leader' led the discussion and made sure that each student shared their understanding and findings based on their role; the other students could comment and respond to the views accordingly. After the discussion, students were given a piece of blank poster paper and coloured pens to design a poster representing their LC discussions on *Pygmalion* to conclude their experience.

### Step 6: sharing LCs

Students were invited to present their poster as a group to the other groups of the class, and then answer any questions from classmates and the teacher. After the presentation, all the posters were put up on the classroom walls with a piece of blank A4 paper attached to each one for students to leave further comments.

### Step 7: concluding learning

The students, under my guidance, wrote individual summaries of the story they had read (the excerpt from *Pygmalion*), based on the own understanding of the text as well as the contributions made by the students with the Summariser role, especially the one in their LC group of nine. They then worked as a whole class to list the new vocabulary and phrases they'd learnt through the LCs, based on the contributions made by all the students with the Word master and Passenger person roles. To list the culture points appearing in this text, as well as the differences and similarities between Chinese culture and the culture found in the story, they used the contributions

made by the students in the role of Culture collector. Finally, they outlined the lessons, knowledge and insights for their real life based on the contributions made by the students in the Connector role.

By now, students not only trained their reading, speaking, listening, viewing and writing skills, but also accumulated some new words and phrases from the literary text. Besides, they practised and enhanced their critical thinking skills through their discussion and comments, demonstrating their creative skills in the poster they created. Most importantly, they gained new insights on both Western and Chinese culture, as well as valuable lessons for real life. The LCs activity also enlightened them on the diverse learning opportunities and approaches associated with English literature, laying a foundation for continuous and life-long English learning. Therefore, through LCs, the four key competences were realised: language ability, cultural consciousness, thinking qualities and learning skills.

## The challenges and solutions

Certainly, despite the numerous benefits LCs may bring to ELT classrooms, there are some challenges that we as facilitators need to consider while implementing such an innovative approach. Possible solutions are suggested accordingly.

### Level gap

A gap in English level is commonplace in almost every classroom, and students with the lowest level of English are usually marginalised during a group discussion. To avoid this, we should make two elements clear to our students when introducing LCs: individual value (everyone can contribute and everyone has an irreplaceable role) and team spirit (to make a good team, every member should assist each other to fulfil their roles). When the LCs begin, we should also pay special attention to these lower-level students, encouraging them to participate and contribute.

### Institutional pressure

LCs, as an innovation for ELT, do not directly concentrate on vocabulary and grammar like traditional reading

methods do: a time-tested way believed to help students get high scores in exams. Institutional pressure may occur when teachers attempt LCs in ELT. Students, parents and school leaders may think we are wasting precious class time. Although I do believe that LCs benefit my students in every way, initially I would suggest teachers try out LCs with the literary texts presented in the textbook only; from there we can see how our colleagues and students respond to the innovation. If both parties appreciate it, then I would suggest carrying on with LCs using more English literature, preferably based on students' own favourite literary materials.

## Off-track arguing or mechanical presentation

Every unguided discussion might go off track; and too much training might lead to a mechanical presentation. The determining role for this part of the approach is the Discussion leader. Therefore, we should ensure that the students playing this role get enough training to fulfil their role properly. One possible way is to demonstrate the role for all students in the class, since all of them may play this role at some point; this helps students understand the importance and nature of this role.

## Conclusion

Indeed, whatever the context is, it is essential for a teacher to consider how to maximise the benefits of class time for students. More importantly, as Forehand (2010:5) proposes, the class needs to have 'clear alignment of educational objectives with local, state and national standards'. Since the ultimate purpose of education is to prepare students for the future, LCs proves their value in ELT not only in making real reading a possibility, developing students' skills and interest in reading, as well as English language learning, but also in nurturing students' critical and creative thinking skills, contributing to the enhancement of students' 21st century skills.

The flexibility of using LCs is that teachers always have the choice to adopt and modify, or even create, their role sheet for their own context.

I am happy that I have found a way to innovate my literature class to make it as engaging, enjoyable and beneficial for my students as possible. However, since we are already in the digital age with the prevalent use of technology for learning and teaching, probably more research could be done to explore the possibilities of digital LCs.

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