

THE PROSPECTS OF READING CIRCLES FOR FOSTERING EFL LEARNERS' MOTIVATION TO READ AND ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Thesis. This study explores three important concepts in the field of language teaching. The purpose is to investigate whether reading circles are effective means of improving students' reading motivation and engagement.

Concept. To this end, using a qualitative design, 27 students of English language and literature from the University of Mazandaran participated in the study. The data were collected through a learning journal, teacher's field notes and a subsequent semi-structured interview. All the students were engaged in a reading circle once a week for the duration of 12 weeks. Analysis of the data was done based on coding and content analysis.

Results and Conclusion. Results indicated that reading circles had the potential to motivate learners to read more and also was an appealing activity for them to engage in and contribute to their circles. The findings suggested that the unrepeatable configuration of the group and the goal setting mindset promoted by the activity and a high sense of achievement and enjoyment after completion of the task corresponded positively with their high level of engagement and motivation to read new passages. Even though the results cannot be generalised to other contexts, they can be suggested to be applied in other EFL contexts for motivating learners to engage more in reading.

Keywords: Engagement, reading circle, Reading Motivation, EFL Learners, Literature Students

INTRODUCTION

Reading has been introduced to be the most important skill and the mainstay of education in EFL academic contexts (Azizi et al., 2022; Ficzero et al., 2021; Khonamri et al., 2020; Gadušová et al., 2021). Readers need to improve their reading skills to be able to get the information from printed materials. Thus, numerous attempts have been done to find ways of developing this important skill in such contexts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). However, despite the importance of reading, reading is a difficult and uninteresting process for many EFL learners (Schiefele et al., 2012; Gadušová et al., 2021).

Moreover, for a lot of teachers encouraging students to read a text and engage in reading-related activities is a tough and arduous task. The problem, is partly due to students' lack of motivation which is a prerequisite for learning (Stutz et al., 2016). Considering Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (Gass & Selinker, 1994) this seems to be an important factor in a reading classroom.

Research has also indicated that reading engagement and motivation play an influential role in assisting learners to develop their reading comprehension

skills, (Orellana & Baldwin, 2018; De Lozier, 2019; Hašková et al., 2021). Earlier studies have also illustrated that, motivation, and perceived reading competence are positively correlated. In fact, motivation has been considered in previous literature as one of the most essential concepts for describing the failure or success of foreign language learners (Katzir et al., 2009). It encourages students to want to learn another language and enables them to keep on. Barbara Ann Brown (2002) finds motivation to be related to choices people make about goals to pursue and about the effort they devote to that pursuit. It also encourages learners to be persistent in achieving any needs or desire (Shorabek et al., 2022). John Guthrie and Allan Wigfield (2000) confer that “motivation is what activates behaviour” (p. 406). For Zoltan Dörnyei (2001), motivation is one of the elements which learners need for language learning success.

Expectancy value theory has been a helpful theory in understanding the relationship between motivation and reading comprehension (Orellana & Baldwin, 2018). This relationship has been explored considerably over the past few decades by different researchers: for example, Reiko Komiyama (2009) contended that teachers should be aware of the link between motivation and reading development. David Sherman et al., (2013), too concluded that motivated learners probably learn more and more quickly than learners who are less motivated.

A considerable line of research informed by pioneers such as Zoltan Dörnyei, have attempted to find ways for enhancing learners' motivation, a complicated concept that is hard to define. Motivation has a significant role in language learning. It is essential for a teacher to know about his/her students' level of motivation in order to make teaching and learning process effective and efficient. By using classroom activities based on students' needs and providing positive affective climate in the classroom, teachers can keep students motivated (Záhorec et al., 2019; Hašková & Záhorec, 2022). Research has suggested that those students with low proficiency level who are highly motivated in learning English are able to achieve more success than those students with high level of proficiency who are less motivated (Gomleksiz, 2001). In fact, one of the dreams of every teacher is to have motivated students. If the students are not motivated, teachers may feel frustrated (Pavlíková & Ambrozy, 2019).

Students have various motivations when they are learning another language. Some of them learn a language in order to find a better job easily and to be more successful in the future. Some others may learn a language in order to just become familiar with the language (Baghana et al., 2022). According to Brown (2002), learners prefer a mixture of both integrative and instrumental motivation for learning a language. There are some cases in which students are motivated from both inside and outside factors so that the two kinds of motivation can be overlapped.

Zoltan Dörnyei (2014) and Christine Muir (Dörnyei & Muir, 2019) for instance, have suggested that teaching materials and classroom activities play a crucial role

in optimising a positive climate that can contribute significantly to increasing motivation. In other words, teachers are responsible for bringing innovation into their teaching by designing activities that are useful, meaningful and most importantly appealing to the students and apply strategies that lead to better comprehension. Jeremy Harmer (2001) believes that innovative approaches to teaching reading may create better learning opportunities as compared to the traditional ones. One of the innovative strategies that teachers use in their reading classroom is reading-circles strategy and one of the purposes of this approach is to foster comprehension (Hiver et.al., 2021) students are instructed to work as a team by forming peer-led small groups both in or outside of class and are encouraged to read with a focus on a particular task and then take part in a discussion first within their own groups and later in a whole class discussion (Daniels, 2002). Each student undertakes a role that changes in other sessions of the reading circles so that up to the end of the term, each student has experienced each role two or more times. When they finish a reading material, the members share their findings with the rest of the members and seek help if they find something confusing or if they are dubious about what they have written (Daniels, 2002). Reading circles have some key features (Daniels, 2002) that make them useful and motivating. For example, groups need to meet on a regular basis and be in touch to make sure every role is taken care of in an effective manner and group meetings tend to be in the form of natural conversations about texts with other members with a lot of personal connections. Students are required to take notes to share with their peers and use them for discussion. The classroom teacher acts as a facilitator mostly and to observe their performance very closely as they apply strategies and interact with each other.

Previous research on reading circles has indicated that they are effective in enhancing L2 readers' engagement in extensive reading (Le, 2021; Xu, 2021; Koné, 2023) and also in enhancing the repertoire of vocabulary knowledge and reading skills of learners (Kim et al, 2017; Lee, et al, 2021). Other studies have also demonstrated the effectiveness of reading circles in fostering readers' engagement and performance (Loi &Thanh, 2022).

While research into reading engagement and reading circles abounds in the literature, understanding the extent to which they can enhance reading motivation has been missing especially in EFL contexts. Thus, this study seeks to explore the extent to which students' English language learning motivation and engagement would be improved by partaking in reading circles. The purpose is to shed light on this area with the hope to benefit from the results in planning more efficient reading classes. Thus, the following research questions were used to guide the study:

- To what extent do reading circles improve learners' engagement and motivation to read?
- What are students' stated factors that contributed to increasing their motivation and engagement level or otherwise?

METHODOLOGY

Design

The type of research design employed in this study was an exploratory qualitative design which used interview, observation, and students' reading logs as means of data collection.

Participants

The participants were 27 students aged 19-22 studying English literature at the University of Mazandaran. They were taking Reading 1 course with 4 credits that met twice a week and one whole session was devoted to reading circles. The majority of students, 82.3% were female students and 18.7% were male. They were all intermediate level students based on the results of an OPT test that was administered at the beginning of the semester to gain some information about students' level of English. For the interview, five students, both male and female, volunteered to participate

Instruments

In this research, interview, observation and students' reading logs were used to collect the necessary data to provide enough insight about the effectiveness of reading circles in enhancing motivation to read and engagement.

Interview

A semi-structured interview was used with five volunteering students in the class to obtain more in-depth insight into their opinions about the extent to which they found reading circles motivating and engaging. The initial questions were selected based on students' reflections in their reading logs, and notes from the observation.

Observation

As a secondary research tool, observation of students' engagement in reading circle was done in two ways. First, students were given some time at the beginning of the class to check everything with each other before they participated in the whole class discussion of the roles. During this time, the teacher-researcher walked to each group and observed how they collaborated with each other and took notes of anything weird or interesting about the level of motivation and engagement in each group. The second observation happened online, when students were told to form a group

in Telegram application and add the teacher-researcher to monitor how students are doing when they are working as a team outside of class.

Reading logs

For each reading circle, students were required to keep a reading log in which they recorded both issues related to the group work and their thoughts and reflections on their reading process and how reading circles are helping them.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The reading programme involved students in reading circles once a week. At the outset of the course, they were informed about the roles they were supposed to take each class time and everything about the activity was explained and demonstrated to them and then practiced with a sample text. Then they were asked to create an online group in the Telegram Application and add the researcher so that she would be able to monitor their group activity and collaboration when they met outside of the class to get prepared for the next whole class activity session. After completing the reading circle activities, they were asked to keep a reading log and submit it the next class time with the other assignments. At the end of the course, some volunteering students participated in an interview for obtaining a deeper understanding about their opinion and thoughts about the reading circles and to what extent they found it engaging and motivating.

Each reading circle consisted of five members for five roles which were adopted from and were switched each session so that all members performed all the five roles during the five sessions. Moreover, students were told to negotiate for the roles they wanted to choose.

DATA ANALYSIS

In order to answer the research questions, students' reading logs, their interview transcripts, and the teachers' observation notes were analysed thematically and carefully. The interview data was first transcribed and then a coding software, MAXQDA, was used which is a useful tool to arrange the transcribed data in an organised environment. For the observation notes and reading logs, the researchers read them carefully several times capturing any details that could provide insight into participants' experiences with the reading circles. It was an iterative process and it was repeated several times until the themes emerged and the answers to the research questions were found.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

RQ. To what extent do reading circles improve learners' engagement and motivation to read?

Observation notes

For answering this question, the data collected from different sources were used. First of all, the notes from observation illustrated a totally different level of enthusiasm and eagerness in students during the sessions of the reading circle which when compared to the other session of the week, the difference in student motivation and engagement was quite clear. The next note from the observation showed that since all the students were well-prepared for the day as a result of their shared sessions outside of the class, they felt more confident and more willing to share their parts with the class. This is what teachers want to happen in all their classes. Needless to say, the teacher could feel the energy of the class and how restless students were to get to their roles and even insisted on being the first ones to read their parts. Some students acknowledged the use of this activity almost every session and were grateful for experiencing it and provided positive feedback about its implementation. This was not limited only to the class time and even in their online groups, the same level of involvement and participation was noticed which was extraordinary. It is interesting that this was not limited to only some groups but all groups were almost demonstrating similar features.

It is important to note that, one of the things that was done differently in this class was that students were included in the selection of the texts; that is to say, before the session started, a short list containing the title of the texts and a brief explanation about what they were about to read was sent to the students and then they took a poll and informed the teacher of their decision for the next text they wanted to read. This was perhaps one of the contributing factors to their high level of motivation and engagement which needed to be analysed further with the help of data from interviews and reading logs.

Interview results

Based on students' answers, most of them remarked that they liked it and found it really intriguing especially because they could share their understanding with their group members and make sure if they got everything right or not. One student said; 'it is really motivating when I see that I have understood a very difficult concept in the text and feel relieved and become proud.' She continued to say that "It is also really

relieving when you have three or four other classmates next to you to share your concerns with and ask your questions when in doubt.”

When they were asked about the benefits and challenges of the reading circle for them, most of them said that one thing which was difficult for them especially in the early sessions was that it was hard to concentrate on the whole text and they started to look for the parts of the texts which were related to their roles. According to the thematic arrangement done by MAXQDA, almost all interviewees remarked that reading circles helped them to enhance their concentration, improve their comprehension and their critical thinking skills. Moreover, as the programme was enjoyable for them, they were motivated to read more. The following segments were selected from students participating in the interview session:

A (Female, age 19)

It was highly motivating for me to discover that I can function well in my group and others sometimes rely on me to help them complete their task and that I enjoy it. Especially because we were allowed to choose what we wanted to read; they were interesting to me. When I found the texts compelling and interesting, and could understand them, I become a more eager reader. This also helped to boost my confidence and self-esteem.

Student A stated an important thing about how interest in the topic of a text can increase student motivation and engagement level.

B (Male, age 20)

Since we could read at home, and had enough time to get prepared, it helped me to become more autonomous. I had never before been asked by a teacher to read this way and have a chance to help and get help from a group of my classmates whom I have decided to work with. It was really amazing and it gave me power.

Student B in addition to acknowledging the effectiveness of the RC, highlights the significance of previous preparation in performing a task better and the attraction of a novel activity that can be motivating.

C (Male, age 19)

I have noticed that my comprehension has improved. In fact, multiple encounters with several aspects of the same text such as the gist, the inferences made, critical analysis, etc. made it possible for me to learn better and more deeply.

D (Female, age 21):

I really liked this RC, but I had trouble managing my time. I mean I am a very slow reader, better say a non-confident reader and it was really difficult for me to believe that what I have done is good and correct. But it is interesting to say that despite this, I seemed to like it you

know, especially after receiving feedback first from my friends and then from the teacher. I couldn't believe it was me doing such a good job (no matter how hard it was).

E (Female, age 20)

Honestly, I am a taciturn person and I don't like to speak much so naturally I didn't like the reading circles at first. I only did it (not so carefully, though) to get points and secondly to please my instructor. But gradually, since we had to rehearse what we wanted to present, I started to see how I am getting better by engaging in this activity. I had to present my part, so I worked harder each time to impress my friends and of course the teacher. So, I guess it's a sign that RC was effective after all!

Students C, D, and E, each stated the benefit they found engaging in RC such as improved comprehension, better oral performance, and timely and effective feedback. Thus, based on the above excerpts, and the notes from observation, it can be concluded that reading circles were effective means that motivated and involved students in genuine reading activities and had other benefits that are beyond the scope of the current research.

Reading logs

A recurring theme identified in students' log was that they found the class with reading circles fun and at the same time effective. It was fun because it was different from the conventional reading course and it was effective because it was collaborative in nature. The next theme was related to the fact that they were more motivated to read and engage in classroom activities. The third theme was about how working as a team boosted their spirit and they were feeling more confident because they knew they were not alone and could always rely on the help and support of the team. This was true for all four groups except one in which some of the group members were not responsible and did not work as hard as the others and this affected their overall experience. The following excerpts are taken from students' logs which answers the second research question:

Q2. What are students' stated factors that contributed to increasing their motivation and engagement level or otherwise?

The analysis of the reading logs revealed some interesting facts about the features of the reading circles that are worth noting:

Well, in our fifth RC session, each member of the group was assigned to their remaining roles, as we had already taken all other positions. It seemed like every one had to take on the role they felt least qualified for.

In the first glance, this may seem to refer to a negative aspect of the RC since one of the rules explained to groups was that they should change their roles every session

so that they can perform in all the different roles by the end of the term. Since there were five roles to take, they started by choosing their roles based on their interests and skills and thus naturally in the fifth session they needed to start over and try new ones. However, what comes next shows that despite this minor issue, the students still continued to work effectively and their enthusiasm was growing even more:

But this didn't have a negative impact on the overall quality of our groupwork because as part of a collaborative team we could still get help from our group members who both had experienced the role before and were very eager to make themselves useful.

This shows that RC was successful in making students interested to read together and engage wholeheartedly in the task. Another interesting finding was that even when students were assigned to roles they did not like, they were still enthusiastic enough to put in all they could to perform their best in the new role:

This time we had Mary as the click and clunk expert which I think was not really her cup of tea as it required no creativity and she is the most creative member and always comes up with interesting ideas. However, this didn't stop her from doing a great job helping others in their roles.

One problem that was noted in one of the students' logs was related to the problem she had with her group members for not being compatible:

Even though everyone seems to be trying hard to do their parts well, and respect and value others and their opinion I think we still have a bit of difficulty matching as group members.

An interesting note that was almost mentioned in all students' log was the fact that the feeling of having a team that is there to help you was an amazing experience for them and almost every one mentioned this in their log which based on the observation notes was actually true:

Every one participated well and got their parts done while helping others.

Or this one:

Everyone was drowned in their task and the dedication in every single member was clear.

Some of the students have written about the calm and relaxing atmosphere in the group which made it possible for group members to feel comfortable to ask questions if they encountered a problem in doing their part and function better:

The atmosphere in the group is comfortable to collaborate and have good discussions. If anyone has a question, they can easily ask and groupmates are ready to help.

One student wrote about a problem she had found with RC and again interestingly ended with acknowledging the activity:

I don't want to sound unrealistic so I'm going to tell you about some negative points, too. Honestly, the group was a little bit too loud during reading the story and a bit too much laughter but actually it all comes from enthusiasm and passion for sharing their views.

To conclude, the analysis of all the different data gathered throughout the study demonstrated that reading circles are definitely a very strong and useful activity for improving students' motivation to read and enhance their engagement.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current research was to investigate the extent to which the use of reading circles in a reading course could enhance students' motivation to read and their engagement. The discussion is organised based on the main findings in terms of the themes that were identified in the analysis of data.

Increased Enthusiasm and Motivation

Motivation is a complicated notion which is hard to understand and explain. Many terms have been used for referring to motivation such as instincts, internal drives, needs, behavioural changes and conditioned behaviour (Dörnyei et al., 2016). A great deal of research has been done in the area of motivation, and why it is so important to second language learning. Results of this study demonstrated that RC is an influential activity with some positive features that can foster learners motivation.

One of the themes that was identified in the process of data analysis was related to the enthusiasm that most of the students showed while performing several roles in the reading circles which resulted in their genuine participation and motivation to succeed in both within-group and whole class discussions. In fact, the pleasure they felt while doing their tasks as a group was a driving force for them that motivated them to work harder and better on every new text. This was in line with Kadidja Koné (2023) and Glen Poupore (2016). Reading circles as students stated themselves in their logs gave them the opportunity to monitor and take responsibilities for their own learning. They also had a chance to listen to other group members' interpretations of the same text and discuss and share thoughts and opinions with them which made it an enjoyable reading experience for them which was similar to what Zana Ibrahim and Ali Al- Hoorie (2019) found.

The results of the current study indicated that reading circles have not only increased students' reading engagement, but also it has motivated them to become better thinkers, active listeners and improve their communication skills. This was consistent with Brown's study (2002) which showed that students increased motivation resulted

in becoming more competent in reading comprehension skills and listening to other students' thoughts and taking more risks. Catharine Whittaker (2012) have similarly contended that reading circles can be effective for enhancing the enjoyment of reading which could foster motivation.

Positive Group Atmosphere and Engagement

As some of the students disclosed in their logs, the friendly and comfortable atmosphere of the group made them feel confident and triggered them to have much more and better engagement than before. Students' obsession with their reading and roles was so noticeable during the observation and the fact that they insisted on having more time to ensure that they have carefully

completed everything showed the degree of their engagement with the activity. This finding was

in line with Susie Cowley-Haselden's (2020) study which showed that reading circles promoted

students' engagement and interaction in a positive and effective way.

Moreover, group meetings both inside and outside of the class, interactions about texts and selecting and switching roles allowed students to make choices about their learning. Thus, since they were given a choice and had a say in deciding what to do and how to do it, encouraged them to get engaged deeply in the task which was also illustrated in the research of Fatemeh Khonamri et al., (2020), Claudia Peralta-Nash and Julie Duch (2000).

Moreover, the positive atmosphere that most of the students stated they felt in the group was in fact one of the features of the reading circles that contributed most to boosting student engagement. The positive group dynamic was so intriguing that their engagement was extended to their group meeting outside of class as well. This was also shown in Lyahui Chang's (2010) study which found the interrelationship between group cohesiveness and learner engagement. Esther Ho and Kit Ling Lau's (2018) findings also supported the results related to the positive influence of group cohesiveness on learners' reading engagement and elevated performance.

Pleasure and Enjoyment

Obviously, one of the recurrent themes in students' logs and interview transcripts was how fun and enjoyable their group activities were despite moments of difficulty they experienced with some of the texts. They believed that it was very different from their experiences with other reading courses where they found the class and the reading process to be boring and tiring. Research studies have found the influence of pleasure

and enjoyment through extensive reading on learners' outcomes. Some of such studies confirm that positive emotions such as enjoyment and fun play an important role in learning, and influence cognitive processes including attention, retrieval and problem solving (Rodrigo-Ruiz, 2016; Xu, 2021).

Students experience a great sense of achievement and satisfaction when they presented their parts to the whole class and realised how well they have performed. This created great passion for reading and made them feel competent and consequently they enjoyed the activity more than before. This was consistent with the findings of Koné (2022) who also contended that the sense of satisfaction induced enjoyment which eventually resulted in successful language learning experience.

Similar to the results of the current study, Mehmet Sak (2019) indicated that learners' engagement increases when they enjoy what they are doing and the activity interests them. Nguyen Van Loi and Dang Thi Kim Thanh (2022) too demonstrated that learners enjoy reading materials that are either selected by them or are selected by teachers based on their interests. Students reported immense feelings of satisfaction and enthusiasm throughout the course and it was mainly because they said they enjoyed what they were doing and took pride in themselves for the great job that was finally accomplished and acknowledged by their classmates and the instructor. This was consistent with the results of Ibrahim (2020) who argued that enjoyment and enthusiasm sustained students' engagement over the course.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the current study was to explore the effectiveness of the reading circles in a reading course in enhancing student engagement and motivation to read. The results indicated that reading circles are a perfect activity for boosting students' motivation that could result in greater and more intense engagement with reading both inside and outside of class. Three general themes emerged out of the collected data which were identified as increased enthusiasm and motivation, positive group atmosphere and engagement, and pleasure and enjoyment (Cobo et al., 2020).

The findings suggest that reading circles are great assets to use in reading courses and play an important role in enhancing students' reading achievement because of increased and intense involvement in the reading process. Even though the study triangulated some tools to obtain sufficient information from several sources to support the results, still the findings may not be generalisable to other settings with different students or different teachers. However, on the basis of the results of the present study, some recommendations are in place for teaching reading comprehension. It is highly recommended that, syllabus designers, and EFL teachers, consider classroom practices similar to reading circles to make reading experiences exceptional and enjoyable for students (Azizi et al., 2020).

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