Online literature circles during the COVID-19 pandemic: Engaging undergraduate students in Indonesia

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1 INTRODUCTION

Literature circles, reading clubs (Daniels, 2002), or peer-led small group discussions of assigned reading materials (Thomas & Kim, 2019), have been widely implemented to provide students with more opportunities to develop their reading ability at their own pace. Pedagogically speaking, Widodo (2016) contends that literature circles serve as a springboard for students to read the reading materials in which they are interested and share with their peers or group members what they have read in order to enrich their reading experience. Although much research has documented the benefits of enacting literature circles in reading classrooms, the adoption of literature circles in online learning environments has received less attention, particularly in English as an additional language (EAL) context. Thus, the present classroom exploration showcases how literature circles are virtually adapted due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

2 TEACHING CONTEXTS AND REASONS FOR INNOVATION

Junior year students, aged between 18 and 19 years old, majoring in English Education at an Islamic university in Indonesia, were required to take an intensive reading course. This course aims to help students develop strategies to improve their reading comprehension and fluency, enrich their vocabulary repertoire and understand its use in context, and build their critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills. Literature circles were chosen as a pedagogical approach because of ample empirical evidence. For example, Helgeson (2017) reported that using flexible grouping strategies in literature circles helped students improve their reading comprehension and understanding. Further,
Barone and Barone (2016) revealed that assigning students with different roles in literature circles help increase their vocabulary. From a psychological viewpoint, Thomas and Kim (2019) found that students who participated in literature circles showed positive attitudes toward the reading assignment. Widodo (2016) added that literature circles promoted student engagement and empowerment in reading classrooms.

Although the course described in this report was planned to be conducted face to face, the outbreak of COVID-19 forced all meetings of the intensive reading class to be done online. Therefore, virtual literature circles were created. At the beginning, the majority of the students reported that they had difficulty accessing the internet. The survey data showed that more than half (62.7%) or 27 out of 43 students did not have a stable internet connection. This made students feel worried about their participation in online learning (see Parkes, Gregory, Fletcher, Adlington, & Gromik, 2015). To solve this problem, a low-cost technological tool such as WhatsApp (instant messaging application) was chosen. As a learning platform, this technological tool could cope with weak internet connectivity. Through this platform, students could create online discussion groups. Additionally, the students with easy access to the internet could make use of a digital writing assistant, online dictionaries, and an infographic maker for the assigned project called digital infographic poster.

3 | INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES FOR ONLINE LITERATURE CIRCLES TO PROMOTE MEANINGFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The online literature circle was organized as one 90-minute session per week. However, it could last longer depending on the internet access that students could obtain in the scheduled class meeting. A WhatsApp group was created to enable both students and the teacher to engage in online classroom discussions. In addition, a small WhatsApp group of four students was also created to help them discuss assigned reading materials. Online literature circles were enacted based on the following instructional procedures:

1. The students were assigned to read two different books. First, in a group of four, they were requested to select one title of non-fiction graded readers they were interested in. These graded readers range between 400 and 700 headwords and contain lexico-grammatical items that suited students’ language repertoire. The second reading was taken from the book entitled World of Reading: A Thematic Approach to Reading Comprehension by (Baker-Gonzales & Blau, 2009). By reading this book, the students were expected to practice and improve their reading comprehension for individual assignments.

2. Each student in the groups played a different role, and the assigned roles were rotated when the group completed each chapter of readings. Each group could finish one or more chapter on a weekly basis. Following the model of group roles proposed by Widodo (2016), some adaptations were made as shown in Table 1.

3. In each group, the reader shared what he or she read to the group members through voice notes (a WhatsApp feature). The other group members could respond to and comment on what the story reader told them. The summarizer then drafted a reading summary from the story reader and the result of the assigned group discussion. This summary writing was sent to the language editor to be peer-reviewed. Finally, the infographic maker put together the reading assignment into an infographic.
4. The students were required to make an infographic of each chapter as their project. The infographic they created included the information shown in Table 2.

5. After they had completed their infographic (see the appendix), they presented and exchanged it with the other groups in the larger WhatsApp group. This five-stage cyclical process continued each time the students finished.

An illustration video showing how literature circles were implemented in this project can be accessed through the following link: https://bit.ly/lit_circle_IAINJBR.

### Table 1: Group roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job description</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Technological tools</th>
<th>Language/ skill focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story reader</td>
<td>To lead and share the reading of the chapter in the story.</td>
<td>WhatsApp and online dictionary</td>
<td>- Reading comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Reading and speaking fluency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizer</td>
<td>To summarize what the story reader shared.</td>
<td>Online dictionary and grammarly.com</td>
<td>- Writing skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Critical thinking skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language editor</td>
<td>To double check the language used in the summary.</td>
<td>Grammarly.com and corpora.org/coca/</td>
<td>- Writing skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Peer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infographic maker</td>
<td>To create infographic using an online infographic maker.</td>
<td>Canva.com</td>
<td>- Creativity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Infographic making tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A short reading summary</td>
<td>To help the students recognize the main idea/point of the story.</td>
<td>Between 30 and 50 words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar vocabulary</td>
<td>To help the students improve their vocabulary and enable them to use it in context.</td>
<td>Four words including meaning and example use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading response</td>
<td>To help the students learn the value of the story they read.</td>
<td>Between 30 and 50 words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning experience</td>
<td>To help the students reflect on their learning experience or how they can make connection to the story they read.</td>
<td>Between 30 and 50 words.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS’ ENGAGEMENT IN A VIRTUAL READING CLASSROOM

Drawing on students’ reflections on their engagement in the online literature circles, the students expressed that it was difficult for them to communicate in an effective and timely fashion to discuss their project. However, they realized that the situations each student faced were unique to that particular student. For example, Vicky (female, pseudonym) tried to show sympathy on her friend’s situation and condition:
The biggest challenge when I studied intensive reading is that it was difficult to make a good discussion about reading assignment with my team. Sometimes one of them didn’t activate his/her mobile phone for the whole day, but then I remembered that during this difficult time my friend would probably have a problem with internet access or mobile phone signal.

Although the students encountered technical problems, they learned much on how to use the mobile phone and its applications as tools to complete their project on the creation of an infographic or poster creatively and wisely. Ahmad (male, pseudonym) expressed his experience through his learning journal as seen in the following excerpt:

Besides we had some obstacles, actually we had a positive attitude towards learning activities, especially in reading. We thought that we were able to mix and match some applications, such as Canva application to create a poster creatively. And it also helped us check our written English in the poster using Grammarly application. The most positive effect is to help us become more creative and wise learners by using our mobile phone device.

Finally, creating an infographic poster as another form of students’ weekly assignment has helped the students share responsibility in performing their role in the group work. They also made use of a low-cost instant messaging application to stay in touch with their group members and show their responsibility toward the assigned reading tasks. Fatim (female, pseudonym) shared her learning experience as seen in the following excerpt:

There were four parts of the intensive reading assignment we must write in the infographic namely summary, difficult vocabulary, learning experience, and reading response. During the online class, we experienced some difficulties of course! But we can build the strategy by dividing it specific roles in the group and rotated the role regularly as one project was completed. We also used instant messaging application such as WhatsApp for keeping in touch with our group on the process of making the assignment.

5 | CONCLUSION

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the students practiced literature circles in the classroom where they were engaged in group discussions face to face to talk about the chapter of the story they read. Afterwards, they visited the other group members and shared their story. From this experience, the “traditional” literature circles were adapted online mediated by online learning platforms. Online literature circles could allow the students to engage in reading tasks in the English as an additional language (EAL) intensive reading classroom in a meaningful way despite the challenges of remote learning. The reading tasks could nurture the students to harness sympathy among the group members, help them use the mobile phone and its application in a positive and creative way, and share similar responsibilities for completing the project. Although this small innovation could be considered as a way of adapting to the new normal life, further research on how online literature circles can be well implemented in wider contexts is worthy of investigation.
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\section*{REFERENCES}


APPENDIX
Sample of students' infographic.

JAKE’S PARROT
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SUMMARY
Jake keeps talking about dinner to Brigid. But she couldn’t because she had it with
her mom. So Jake asked her to come to his birthday the next day.
Finally, Brigid congratulated and accepted his invitation.
Besides, Jake also changed the game with Aidan’s help. While doing that, Tomas asked
Aidan the coffee and biscuits, so he always in bad mood condition, if Tomas commanded
him.
After that, when Aidan went back to his desk, he read a magazine that made him realize
he wants to be a rich man.
In the evening, Jake waited for Brigid. Not long after that, she came and asked him
to get the nearest restaurant.
But it was crowded, so they decided to go back to the apartment.
Jake was shocked because some of his friends were there to celebrate his birthday.

VOCABULARY
1. Clap (v): hit your open hands together several times to show your approval
   of something.  
   Ex: she clapped her hands over her mouth
2. shout (v): say something in a loud voice  
   Ex: don’t shout at me!
3. exhibition (n): a public show of pictures, etc  
   Ex: there is an exhibition of French sculpture in my hometown
4. Excited (adj): full of happy feelings  
   Ex: They were excited about the prospect

READING RESPONSE
In each condition, don’t make a decision too fast. 
Think about it twice!
Since we never know whether a good or bad thing will happen to us.
just try to be optimistic about all we are doing.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE
Not all people can comprehend the text. 
Based on the experience, we have some tips about how to be
able to recover it easily. First, It’s better for reading
in a quiet place, in order to make you more relaxed.
Second, turn your internet off. So that the notification from
your boyfriend couldn’t disturb your concentration.
Third, Underline some unfamiliar words, then look them up
in the dictionary. For the last, Find the main point of the text.