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USING LITERATURE CIRCLES ON ENHANCING EFL LEARNERS' LITERARY TEXTS'  
READING COMPREHENSION: THE CASE OF ALBAHA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study is intended to test the significance of using literature circles as a method in developing students' literary text reading comprehension skills. In the environment where English is considered as a second or foreign language, students mainly have problems in literary texts analysis. This difficulty may be as a result of problems in reading comprehension of the literary texts. Therefore, the idea is initiated from the need for further tools in developing literary text comprehension skills among Albaha university students. To achieve the objectives of the study, the researchers adopted pre-test and post- test method. Thirty students participated in the study. The result of the study respondents shows that literature circle is a good method in teaching literary texts. The significance of this method is appreciated since it facilitates students' literary texts reading comprehension and provides an environment of cooperative learning and motivates students to read and write. This is apparent in the students' performance in the post-test after being exposed to the technique of literature circles. Hence, it can be recommended as one of the reliable tools that can be used in teaching literature and developing literary texts reading comprehension.

**Keywords:** literature circles, group discussion, module, reading comprehension

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studying Literature helps in providing good opportunities for students to discuss how authors write creative good work of literature. Students do so by choosing the literature as well as by reflecting their responses, and taking ownership of their learning insights as they read. They then participate in reflective discussions about literature within supportive group environments. Literature Circles are small groups of students who are reading, responding to and discussing the same book. Literature circle programmes provide the opportunity for students to have some control over their learning, simply because they usually choose their own materials. The main advantage of this method is that, after the groups of students respond individually, they have open conversations about their books.

**2. Statement of the Research problem:**

It has been observed that most university students have difficulties in analyzing literary texts due to reading comprehension problems they regularly face. The use of the traditional methods in teaching literature has negatively impacted students' performances in the literary analysis. Therefore, a literature circle is to be found as an appropriate method to enhance students' techniques of reading comprehension skills. It also helps enhancing writing literary text analysis. The method seems as learner centered one simply because it provides an environment of cooperative learning in which students work in groups.

**3. Questions of the study**

1. To what extent literature circles facilitate students' literary text reading comprehension?
2. How far this method provides cooperative learning environment and motivates students to read and write?

**4. Hypotheses**

- Literature circles help EFL learners reading and enhance their reading comprehension skills.
- Literature circles provides atmosphere of cooperative learning which motivates students to read and write literary text analysis.

**5. Literature Review**

Literature circles as a model was first developed by Daniels, H. (1994). It was appeared as a method of literary studies after a team of teachers and experts began to develop a model generated and initiated from the old adult book clubs and reading groups. This method was exclusively adopted in the United States of America for teaching and learning literature. But now it is as a flourished method used in many countries such as Finland, Australia and Canada. To sum up this point, we can say that literature circles method have approved its effectiveness in many countries. Therefore, the researchers believe that it is time to be applied in our universities so as to develop reading and writing skills.

Spiegel (1998) advocates that Literature circles are one form of literature-based instruction, where small groups of students gather to discuss a piece of literature in depth guided by their own personal responses. Students then prepare for group discussion by reading independently and completing a role sheet that summarizes one aspect of the reading process. Spiegel also states that this literacy method involves students responding in response journals after the group discussions. Both the role sheets and response journals are an essential part of the learning process, as students need to respond independently to prepare for literature circles, share those responses effectively within group discussion, and then reflect upon the literature circle experience. Additionally, Spiegel, argues that as the previous research reveal, it appears that literature circle groups help writers become more proficient in expressing their own ideas, as group discussion helps individuals clarify and refine what is going on in their own minds. In conjunction with this improvement in writing performance, it seems important to consider if literature circles may also influence students' beliefs and attitudes concerning their own writing capabilities and creativity.

As for the effect of literature circles on students' writing performance and creativity it can be concluded that within the group social context, students learn and collaboratively negotiate meaning for the reading by exposure to many diverse thinking modes and perspectives. In effect, literature groups help writers become more adept at expressing their own ideas. Additionally, it raises their written response to reflects reading what is going on in the writer's mind while the group discussion can further clarifies such thoughts.

**The benefits of the literature Circles:**

As pointed out by many of the specialist in the field of language teaching and learning, literature circles have a great benefit for students' language development. (Daniels and Steineke2004) pointed out that literature circles can help students develop skills such as comprehension which are significant when reading a text. They also stated that literature circles enhance visualizing, inferring, connecting and analyzing skills that are essential to strong comprehension and lively conversation.

On the same trend, another benefit of literature circles as stated by (Burner 2007) is that students feel a sense of ownership and responsibility when using the techniques of literature circles in their reading

process. Literature circles also develop students' motivation for learning and can provide a powerful effect on their achievement. There are other benefits of using literature circles in the language classroom as stated by (Schlick Noe and Johnson 1999) such as the students collaborative response which is important for providing students away to engage in critical thinking and reflection.

#### **Selection of the suitable textbooks**

As pointed out by Farinacci, (1998) the materials that are used in literature circles have a crucial role in the success and the effectiveness of the discussions. On the same trend, Brabham and Villaume (2000), stated that fiction as a genre of literature is the mostly used material for reading in literature circles, although other types of reading material can successfully used and achieve similar results in the students' performances.

Authors, such as Farinacci (1998) and Peralta-Nash and Dutch (2000) suggested a criteria for selecting texts to while using literature circles in language classroom. The following are their suggested criteria:

- Comprehensible to students of different abilities and interests
- Reflect students' language needs and skills
- Address issues/topics relevant to students' lives
- Provoke students' thinking and discussion

#### **The reading –writing connection:**

The connection between reading and writing is very close and they are inseparable for writing depends on reading. There is a kind of integration between reading and writing when using literature circles in language classroom. On this regard, Norwick (1995) suggested that there are different ways that can be applied to enhance learners' enjoyment, appreciation and understanding of literature. In literature circles, the reader-response theory is applicable for it depends on the role of the reader in literary text interpretation.

The philosophy of the reader-response theory pays more attention to the participation of the reader and it is a process- oriented approach to reading literature. This approach encourages activities that support students to depend on their personal previous experiences, opinions and use their feelings in the process of interpreting any work of literature. Edgar (2006) regards the reader response critical approach is rooted in phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that deals with understanding of how things appear. Reader-response theory holds that the reader is a necessary third party in the author-text-reader relationship that constitutes the literary work. In other words, the work is not fully created until readers make a transaction with it by assimilating it and actualizing it in the light of their own knowledge and experience.

Louis Rosenblatt is considered as the central figure to the theory of reader response. In her work literature as exploration (1968), Rosenblatt has described the process of readers' engagement and involvement with the text to compose their own point. Like other reader response theorists Rosenblatt argues that the literary text has no meaning until its read, a novel or poem or play remains merely inkpots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. She also described what happens when readers read and that reading any literary work is a unique experience that involves the minds and emotions of the readers. Moreover, she urged teachers and readers not to think of the reading of literature as a passive act. She pointed out that when a piece of literature is successful for readers that success comes from the fact that they bring to the selection all that they are and have experienced.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

To achieve the objectives of the study the researchers adopted test-retest method, pre-test is given to a thirty, third year students before they are exposed to the literature circles drills then they are given post-test after students being exposed to the literature circles. Students were asked to read literary text and answer the questions in both cases. In the pre-test students were assigned to read text personally while in the post test the literature circles module was applied ahead. Hence, the two tests were assigned to test the achievements of the respondents in both cases and examine the significance of using literature circles when teaching literature.

**DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS**

To conduct this study the researchers have adopted test-retest method. Two tests were designed, pre- and post tests. First, a pre-test is given to (30) subjects randomly selected from third level EFL students in Albaha university before they are exposed to the literature circles drills. The subjects then have given post-test after being exposed to the literature circles. The subjects were asked to read literary text and answer the questions in both cases. Additionally, they were assigned to read a text personally in the pre- test stage, while in the post test the literature circles module was applied ahead. Hence, the two tests were assigned to test the achievements of the respondents in both cases and examine the significance of using literature circles when teaching literature.

The respondents' tests have been graded and analyzed then. To analyze the data collected, the researchers used office excels worksheet. The data analysis shows that the majority of the subjects have done well after being exposed to literature circles module. In other words, it is significant that the subjects scored high grades in the post- test compared to their grades in pre- test stage. Thus, the researchers believe that it is extremely important to encourage both EFL teachers and students alike to use the literature circles in teaching and learning reading as well as writing. The following figures illustrate the data analysis.

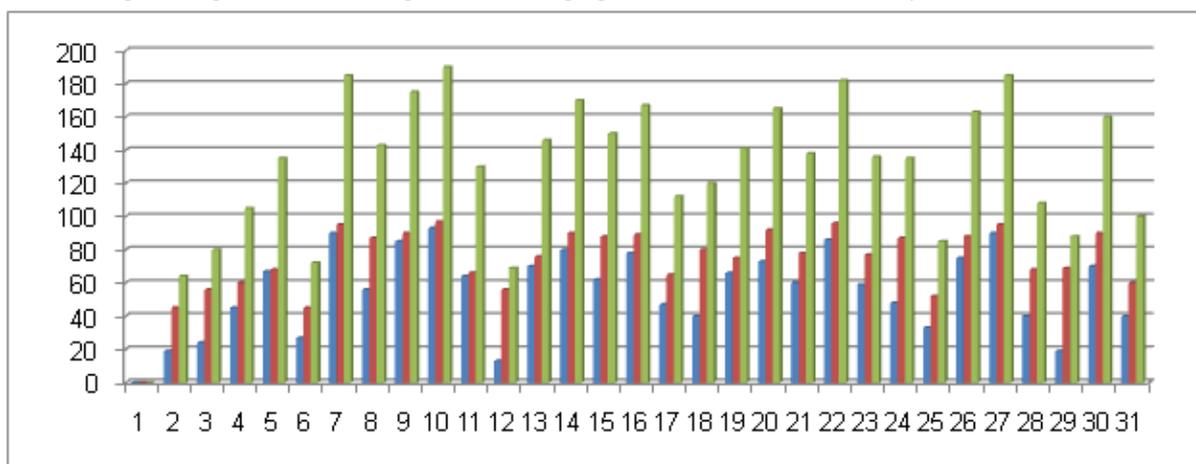


Figure no. (1) the frequency distribution for the respondents' grades about the ( pre & post tests).

The above figure shows the frequency distribution of both the pre and the post tests. As stated above thirty subjects have participated in taking these tests, the figure illustrates that the majority of the subjects have completed the task successfully. It is also remarkable that items no (7, 9, 29) showed the highest grades regarding the respondents' answers in pre – test. On the hand, the figure illustrates that items (7,11,23,27) are the highest grades achieved by deponents in the post – test stage. Finally, it is also clear that items (7, 10, 22, 27) represent the highest total grades scored by the subjects in both the pre and the post tests.

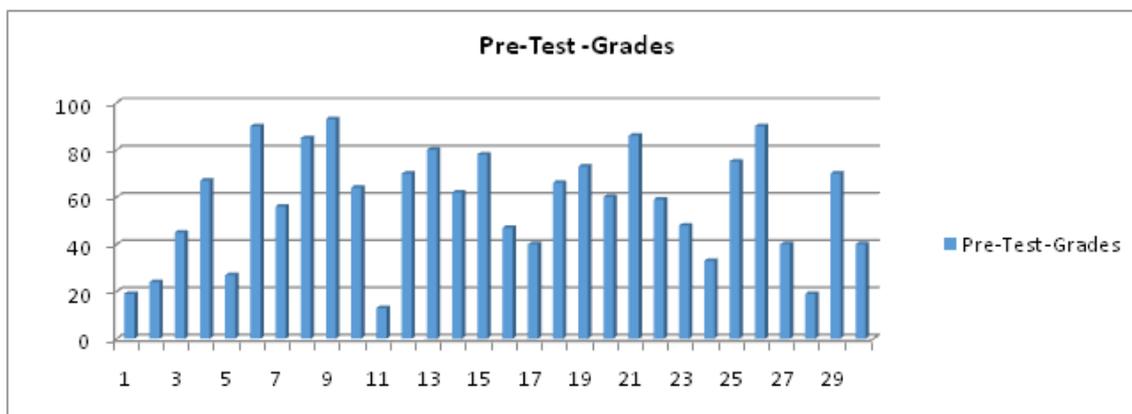


Figure no. (2) the frequency distribution for the respondents' grades about the pre- test.

The above figure shows the respondents' pre- test grades. It is remarkable that items (6, 8, 21, 26) represent the highest grades achieved in this test. The figure also shows the lowest grades scored by the respondents in items (5,11, 8). The lowest grades shown in this figure may to some extent illustrates the impact of individual reading of the text given to the respondents. As professional teachers, the researchers think that reading comprehension individually is not as effective as reading that followed by group discussions.

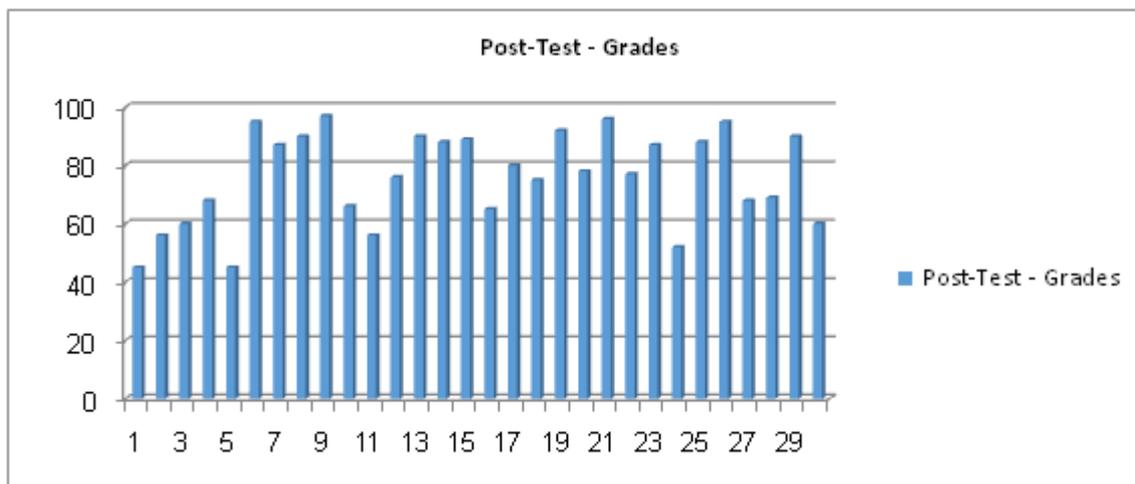


Figure no. (3) the frequency distribution for the respondents' grades about the post- test.

The above figure shows the respondents' grades after being exposed to the text where literature circles modules is adopted. The post- test is clearly illustrating progress made by the respondents as compared to the pre one. For instance, respondents have shown an overall progress in all items as shown above. It is remarkable that the highest grades are shown by items ( 6,9,21,26) . On the hand, the respondents' lowest post- test grades is represented by items (5,11,24). However, these items are much higher than some items in the pre- test stage. This indicate that the literature circles module, where group discussions have been the central issue for the reading text has motivated the subjects. Thus, the figure shows an overall improvement of reading comprehension illustrated by the respondents grades.

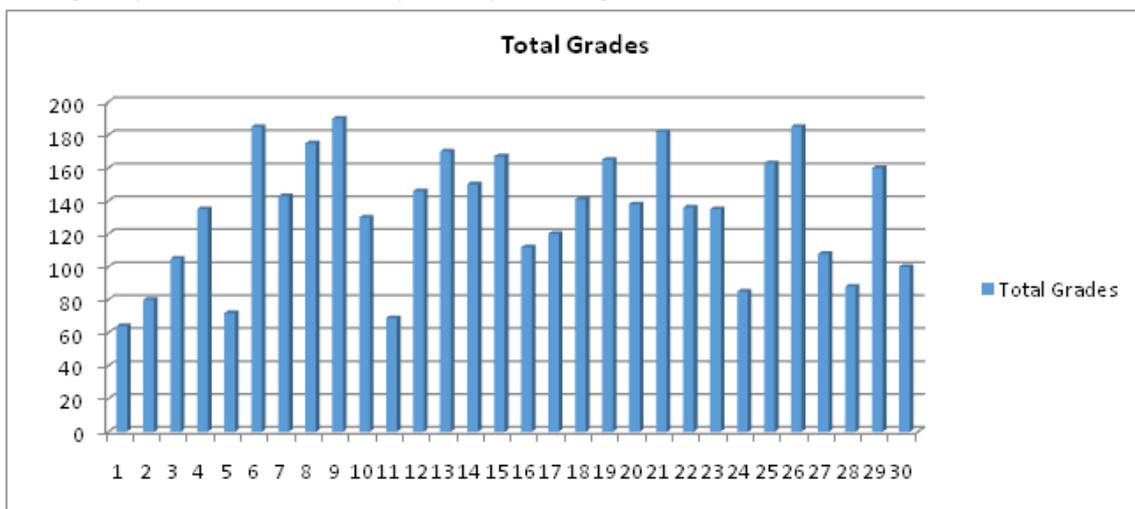


Figure no. (4) the frequency distribution for the respondents' total grades about the pre& post tests.

The above figure illustrates the calculation of the two tests through which total grades of the respondents' are shown. In general, items (6, 8,21, 26) are the highest grades scored by the respondents in both the two tests. While, items ( 5, 11, 24, 28) remark the lowest grades.

**FINDING**

In the light of the data analysis, we conclude that, using literature circles module is found as more effective and motivated in learning reading comprehension. This method is approaching as learner centred

rather than teacher centred, simply because it provides an opportunity to EFL learners to discuss and negotiate the text after reading it. Additionally, such group discussions may result in cooperation between the group members, where every member has an opportunity of stating his ideas clearly.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend the following:

1. Using literature circles module is extremely important in EFL classes, since this approach is mainly addressing learner centrism.
2. Using literature circles module in EFL classes creates an atmosphere of cooperative learning particularly, in reading comprehension, therefore, teachers may find it more motivated.

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Pre-test & post-Test

Respondents	Pre-Test	Post-Test
1	19	45
2	24	56
3	45	60
4	67	68
5	27	45
6	90	95
7	56	87
8	85	90
9	93	97
10	64	66
11	13	56
12	70	76
13	80	90
14	62	88
15	78	89

16	47	65
17	40	80
18	66	75
19	73	92
20	60	78
21	86	96
22	59	77
23	48	87
24	33	52
25	75	88
26	90	95
27	40	68
28	19	69
29	70	90
30	40	60

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