



Literature circles: a door to students' life experiences in the classroom

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Abstract

This article describes students' interaction process as they explored and built their aesthetic responses in literature circles. Participants constructed meaning of each piece of literature through the reading and discussion of books with their classmates. This project was carried out with 10th and 11th graders in a public school in Bogotá. They attended three hours of English class as a foreign language per week and it was through this time that the project was carried out. The students' discussions in the literature circles were conducted in Spanish. Data collection sources for this project include students' journals, audiotapes and video recording. The analysis of the participants' responses showed their critical reflection upon human nature according to both their own set of values, and the context in which they were immersed. Interaction played a relevant role since all these responses were manifested when participants worked together to share their ideas and life experiences.

Key words: literacy, aesthetic responses, literature circles.

Resumen

Este artículo describe el proceso de interacción de los estudiantes a medida que exploran y elaboran sus respuestas estéticas en círculos literarios. Los participantes construyeron significado de cada historia a través de la lectura y discusión de libros con sus compañeros. Este proyecto se llevó a cabo con estudiantes de grado 10° y 11° en un colegio público en Bogotá. Los estudiantes reciben 3 horas de clase de inglés como idioma extranjero durante la semana y fue durante ese tiempo que se llevó a cabo el proyecto. Las discusiones de los estudiantes en los círculos literarios se hicieron en español. Los instrumentos para la recolección de datos que se utilizaron incluyen los diarios de los estudiantes, y las sesiones de audio y video. El análisis de las respuestas de los participantes mostró una reflexión crítica acerca de la naturaleza del ser humano de acuerdo con sus valores y el contexto en el cual viven. La interacción desempeñó un rol importante ya que los estudiantes manifestaron sus respuestas a medida que ellos se reunieron y compartieron sus ideas y experiencias en los diferentes grupos.

Palabras claves: lecto-escritura, respuestas estéticas, círculos literarios.

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Introduction

As a novice teacher researcher, I consider that reading in the classroom is a useful language learning tool which allows students to construct meaning as they transact with texts. Clavijo, (1998) states, that the use of literature books in the classrooms motivate children to enter into foreign language literacy. She also asserts that literature is a meaningful tool which provides children with an appropriate environment, authentic situations and enjoyable context for learning. I realized that my students liked to read different types of texts in English but, they had difficulties to express their viewpoints and comments to the whole group.

I observed how working with literature matched my purposes of establishing a bridge that allowed my students not only to speak the language, but to express their views regarding the contents of the readings. The need for providing these students with opportunities to read, discuss, and feel more confident to share their responses with the group, encouraged me to implement literature circles in the classroom as an appealing alternative to implement in the classroom setting.

Thus, this article will focus on the use of literature circles that could allow my students to show how they were, what they thought, and what their concerns were and show different manifestations of their personal traits. Literature circles offer my students the possibility to negotiate multiple interpretations, which can support a deeper analysis of texts. The study took place in a public school in 10th and 11th grade classroom in Bogotá, Colombia and focused on discussions in Spanish, of different books in English chosen by students and read by them in class.

Research Questions

What are EFL students' aesthetic responses to pieces of literature when interacting in Literature Circles?

How do EFL students' discussions during Literature Circles shape aesthetic experiences?

Literature Review

This project was based on three main concepts. The first one is literacy, the second one is aesthetic stance based on the findings of Rosenblatt (1978, 1991, 1993, 2002), and the third one is literature circles.



Literacy

Rosenblatt, (1978) Freire and Macedo (1987a) and Goodman (1996), define literacy not only as the act of reading, writing and thinking, but also they refer to it as the construction of meaning from printed text within a socio-cultural context. Additionally, Rosenblatt (1991) considers literacy as a transaction that involves a reader, a text and a context. Furthermore, she claims that meaning happens during the transaction between the reader and the text. She also states that meaning does not come from outside influence; it comes from the individual. In this sense, Rosenblatt, (2002) states that both adolescents and children provide the text with past experiences, remembrances, needs and concerns to make meaning of it. In the author's view, the adolescent experiences the text in a very special manner due to she/he does not have yet a solid perspective about life neither has a defined personality. Thus, adolescents are eager to understand the adult's roles, the situations in which they are involved and they also tend to foresee the possible repercussions of their own actions in the other's lives among other aspects. In sum, it was evidenced that through the reading of stories and the interaction with their partners my participants became more aware of people's personalities, they also learnt to figuratively put themselves in the character's shoes making them more sensitive people and reinforcing respect for others. Like Rosenblatt, Goodman thinks that reading is a transaction between a reader and a text. Furthermore, he claims that the sense the reader makes of a text does not depend on the marks of the paper; it depends on the sense she/he brings to it. In this respect as readers interact with the text, they contribute with their previous knowledge and experiences to construct and shape its meaning.

On the other hand, Freire states that literacy is not only reading and writing words, but has to do with an active relationship between words and the reader's reality, regarding her/his experience of the world. We read the world since we are born, thus when we begin our educative process at school, we already have our own referents and a previous knowledge of it. In the author's view, language and reality are interconnected in such a way that reading the word should never entail a break with reading the world. I consider it relevant to allow adolescents to connect the reading book with their lives, with their own context. Additionally students are more interested in reading to learn about the world when they relate their own contexts to the one presented in the book they read. That way, they will have to bring their personal story life to the



classroom setting. They can express freely what they think, believe, liked and feel according to their previous knowledge of the world. I also consider that it gives me the opportunity to transform reading and writing into a meaningful experience for my students, providing them the chance to enjoy the fact of being thinkers when exposed the lines they read. Therefore, I find the concept of literacy that these authors outline to be useful as my interest was to explore the social aspects such as my students' feelings, perceptions and their own voices in their cultural contexts. In other words, this is using literacy as a tool to allow my students to enter their own world in school life.

From my point of view and considering the last authors' utterances, I understand reading to be more than a process of recognition of words. In this sense, reading implies a construction of meaning carried out by an individual who becomes part of a defined context and brings to the text her/his prior knowledge, feelings, thoughts, interests, and points of view in order to shape it.

Aesthetic and efferent stance

Rosenblatt, (1991) asserts that in the reading transaction the words of the text may activate two kinds of elements from referents of memory: public and private. The former includes objects to what the verbal symbols point. And the latter are referents which had to do with the sensuous, affective, imaginary and associative that not only embody ideas but sensations, images, concepts, states or qualities of states and feelings. In the author's view, every linguistic act embodies public and private elements and both aspects of meaning are always present in our transaction of the world. She points out that "the reader must select a general stance, a mental set, toward the internal states that will be activated by the pattern of words" (1991, p. 119). She refers to stance as the attitude of mind that the reader adopts. Moreover, one part of the continuum of potential stances which cover the mental set is what Rosenblatt (1991) has defined as the *efferent* and *aesthetic stance*. According to the author, there is no opposition, no dichotomy, but a continuum between the two stances. In the author's view, "the difference lies in the mixture of the proportion of public and private aspects of meaning attended during while reading" (1993, p.310).

Rosenblatt coins the term "efferent stance" from the Latin *efferre* ("to carry away"). In this sense, the reader's attention is focused mainly on gathering information, just understanding what the text says. On the other hand, when the reader responds from the *aesthetic* stance, she/he focuses her/his attention



primarily on what she/he experiences after reading a poem, a play or a story. In an aesthetic reading what is most important to a reader is the enjoyment and interaction with the text. According to the author, the word “aesthetic” is selected from the Greek because it suggests perceptions through the senses, feelings and intuitions. In my research the “aesthetic” stance proposed by Rosenblatt is more relevant since my participants respond to books during discussions in the literature circles bringing up their emotions, feelings, interests and experiences. But actually both stances the efferent and aesthetic were integrated in my students’ responses and they may change while the reader progresses through a text, while the reader may decide to adopt a particular stance during reading.

Literature circles

Literature discussions are literature circles where a small group of participants read a book, or someone read it to themselves, and then, they sit and discuss the meaning arisen from their understandings and personal connections (Short, 1995, 1997). These connections are referred to as the intertextual connections that readers make across the texts read with their past and present experiences (Short, 1993). According to the author, intertextual connections frequently discussed about in literature circles are related to characters, themes, plot, illustrations, reader response, and their own experiences. Short states that when participants have the opportunity, and the appropriate guidance and support, they are capable of participating in meaningful conversations about texts, connect their experiences and construct meaning of what they are reading. These circles create a *Zone Of Proximal Learning* (ZPD) in which children are able to learn under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vigotsky, 1978). When students come together in each literature circle to discuss the book they have chosen, they reflect, revise meaning and extend their views.

Considering the idea that reading is more meaningful if students have the opportunity to interact with their peers about what they read, I decided to implement literature circles in my classroom. The implementation of this project required the use of different genres, which aim was to provide varied choices for the students to read. This information was collected by a survey. The results showed that students preferred to read mystery topics. Some of the stories chosen by the students were “The Confession of Charles Linkworth”



by E. F. Benson, "The Black Cat", "The Fall Of The House Of Usher", and "The Murders in the Street of Death" by Edgar Allan Poe, and "The Canterville Ghost" by Oscar Wilde.

During the implementation of this project, I experienced some difficulties. One of them was the acquisition of the literature books to be used in this research project was one of the main barriers because the school where I work did not have enough resources to acquire them. For this reason I had to visit different places in order to obtain the books I could use for my project. Some of these places did not have books about the topics related to my students' preferences according to the survey I applied. Finally, after a long search, I was able to gather some books that my teacher and colleagues at the master program lent me.

Research Methodology

There are some important points to keep in mind when implementing literature circles in the classroom. First of all, I provided students with different books in order for them to select their favorite readings. As teachers we need to stimulate free choice rather than imposing our own. As I said above my participants group decided previously the type of genre they preferred. Another important point to take into account is students' proficiency level. Before asking students to work in small groups, there should be a preliminary preparatory stage to help them with the readings. More specifically, in my case I included strategies such as reading aloud, using big books and making posters to contextualize vocabulary. I designed several reading guides which included matching exercises, sequencing exercises, writing true or false statements, completing mind maps, describing a character or a situation. Drawing the information given helps with the understanding of the content. All these strategies reinforce vocabulary and are aimed at strengthening reading comprehension. Without comprehending the text first, it is impossible to gather, discuss and comment the books in the small groups.

I based the implementation of the different stages of the literature circles and activities mainly on the work proposed by researchers like Harste & Short (cited in Miller, 1991) and Pollack, Spiegel, McLellan & Brown (2002). I followed four-stage methodology that I have called *Inviting students to read and explore a story*, *Getting students involved in the dynamics of the literature circles*, *Encouraging students to discuss the story in small groups* and *sharing their*



interpretations and views of the stories (performances). I hence shall explain every step in this methodology

Inviting students to read and explore a story

The purpose of this stage was to invite students to be familiarized with a story in English. I read aloud to students a story using an illustrated big book. Then, based on the title, the cover and the illustrations, students predicted what it might be about. Then, after reading a part of the story, the students made their own predictions of it. After that, I invited them to participate in a whole group discussion about the book. The last part of this stage was to provide students with a prompt in order for them to respond to it on their journals, such as “How did the story make you feel?”. According to Kong & Fitch (2002), the writing prompts are open-ended questions designed to encourage students’ personal, creative and critical responses and to develop their literacy skills.

Getting students involved in the dynamics of the literature circles

The purpose of this stage was to introduce students to literature circles. After explaining the participants in detail about what a literature circle was and how it worked, students joined the group they wanted to belong to and chose the book they preferred to read for the next couple of weeks. As students read the stories with their group, I provided them with reading workshops which helped them to improve their comprehension due to the fact that my students’ English level is not good, they only have three hours per week for each group.

Encouraging students to discuss the story in small groups

The purpose of this stage was to foster students’ discussion. After reading one part of the story and completing the reading workshops, students responded to some prompts in their journal. The prompts are an important aspect that must be taken into account in the design because they help students to set up purposes for the reading. The purpose of using prompts in this research study was to encourage students to experience the texts aesthetically by exploring the elements of literature and by making connections between the texts and their own lives. In my case I used prompts as an alternative to invite my students to trigger discussions, since when they began to interact in group their responses were very short and limited. The prompts also helped students to take a position about characters, or situations among other aspects.



Sharing their interpretations and views of the stories (performances)

At the conclusion of the literature circles, the members of each group presented the book to the rest of the class. Some groups made a role play about the story they read; they wore costumes to perform the story and used charts or posters to illustrate it. Two groups interviewed the author of the story as part of the presentation. And a group made a contest named "Who told the truth?" (*¿Quién dijo la verdad?*), in which they wore special clothes and scenography to perform it. Additionally, at the end of the activity, the whole group as the audience had the opportunity to express their points of view about the story or to provide the presenters with feedback.

Participants

This study was conducted with girls and boys from 10th and 11th grade. They are teenagers from 15 to 19 years old. They belong to a middle low social status and most of them live in the Southeast part of the city. They attended three hours of English as a foreign language per week in a big public school in Bogotá. This is not enough to master the language. In all public schools students attend English classes since the last courses in elementary when they are in 4th or 5th grade and along all high school. This study took place in two different moments. The first part took place from October to November 2004 with a coeducational group from 10th grade. Next year, when I continued collecting the data the organizational structure of the school changed; the students at school were grouped by gender. For this reason from April to May 2005, data were collected from a group of girls. Most of the girls have participated at the implementation of the project the previous year.

I selected these groups of participants because they were eager and motivated to read stories in English. In general, all the students were very receptive and participated actively in the literature circles. At the beginning, the students were shy and felt anxious when I recorded their voices. Then, when they became familiar with the tape recorder and talked freely.

Data collection and analysis

I collected information from students' journals, audio recordings and video recordings. I was interested in examining what aesthetic responses the students produced and how their discussions in literature circles shaped their responses. The use of these methods of data collection allowed me to compare and



contrast the information collected and to confirm the initial findings of my data analysis. As Hubbard and Miller (1993) state, triangulation is the use of multiple sources to support findings.

These are the two categories I found in this study: *Highlighting human behavior: dichotomous views based on values* and *Building different voices and perspectives*. And this is a second aspect which emerged from the first category: *Digging into the character's world*.

Findings

The data analysis showed the different aesthetic responses that my students explored during the discussion in the literature circles and the aspects of the interaction which contributed to building their aesthetic view.

Highlighting human behavior: dichotomous views based on values

The content of the participants' responses involved their opinions of human behavior as well as they included and emphasized descriptions, explanations, or justifications as to why humans display certain behaviors. These responses indicated that their concept of human behavior was built on their own set of values which show a dichotomous perspective. Their discussion fell into the concepts of right and wrong or justifiable and unjustifiable. They even manifested their preference for characters that possessed positive attitudes rather than negative ones. Another salient feature of this dichotomy was students' acknowledgement that humans have both strengths and weaknesses. Rosenblatt (2002) points out that these types of responses are to be expected in an aesthetic reading. According to her, when the reader is touched by a masterpiece, she/he reflects on matters related to good and evil, admirable qualities or unsociable attitudes as well as justifiable and unjustifiable actions. And she adds that "the common student tends to judge spontaneously the characters' actions that she/he finds in the text" (p.42). The students' responses were explored enough when they commented them on their journal, or they interacted in the different groups and expressed their opinions about the stories they read.

In the next sample, the students were talking about the book "The Black Wood" by John Buchan. They were using the prompt: Did the main character do the right thing? (*¿Ustedes creen que el personaje hizo lo correcto?*)

- T: Pues a mi me pareció que no porque de todas maneras
Ante cualquier circunstancia escaparse de la casa, es



Escaparse y les pudo haber ocurrido algo peor. Tuvieron
Fue suerte, pero les pudo haber ocurrido algo peor”.

- V: Pero también actuó bien en el momento que formó un
plan para atrapar a los ladrones que se habían robado unos
aretes en el bosque negro”.
(Audiotape, October 19, 2004)

In this example, the first student manifested that the character was wrong because she left home without asking for permission. This may be due to the fact that they are teenagers and for them it is important to follow some rules at home. In this case, Tatiana's life experience plays an important role here to help her determine the value of the character's behavior. The second student responds to the first one but she looks at the same character from a positive perspective, emphasizing the fact that he was right at a crucial moment in the story. She considers the character's attitude was a right one since she formed a plan to capture the thieves.

Digging into the characters' world

The data collected showed that students connected the book they read with their life experiences and values. It seems that many of their responses were the results of considering themselves as members of the society in which they are immersed. There was a constant preoccupation for exploring the characters, for going in depth into their worlds. According to Rosenblatt (2002), the reader's contact with literature provokes a higher degree of social sensitivity. For her, it is through the reading of stories, poems or plays that readers become aware of people's personalities. They learnt to figuratively put themselves in the character's shoes. It means that readers learn to foresee the repercussions of their own actions after having seen or read about another person's life.

- C: Qué motivos lo llevó a hacer eso, que motivos
lo llevó a matar a su madre, por qué lo hizo, o
sea es ilógico que un hijo llegue a matar a su madre...
- V: Principalmente la idea es como hacernos
amigas de él para poder conocer como sus
sentimientos y el motivo por el cual tiene que matar a
su madre sabiendo que es la persona que le ha dado
el ser. Entonces la idea sería que de niño le faltó, o la
mamá en que falló con él para que él cometiera ese
acto con ella obviamente.
(Source: Audiotape 3, side A, April 7, 2005. p.39)



The first student manifests a desire to know the characters' motifs for murdering his mother and questions the fact as something illogical ("It is illogical from a son to murder his mother"). She goes even further when she proposes a valuable social reflection on the matter. First of all, she wants to know the character's leitmotiv and feelings which led him to commit the crime. On the other hand, the student proposes to analyze the character to know about his emotional or affective disorders (*¿Qué de niño le faltó?*) in order to understand his behavior. On the other hand, the second student questions the mother's attitude and tries to identify reasons for her failure (*... la mamá ¿en qué falló?*). According to her response, perhaps the mother has some responsibility in the crime due to the fact that she failed bringing up her son.

Finally, the next examples were taken from the group who was reading the book, "The Confession of Charles Linkworth", by E.F Benson. They were discussing the prompt: "Compare algún personaje de la historia con usted mismo, un familiar o un amigo!" (Compare a character from the story with yourself, a relative or a friend).

Y: Pues, yo compararía al personaje principal con algunos amigos porque ellos a veces cometen errores y no se dan cuenta.

V: Esto tiene que ver mucho con la sociedad que vemos ahorita, los hijos son muy desprendidos del núcleo familiar, ya que tienen muchos problemas entonces como que piensan en su propio... (someone in the group says "bienestar"), bienestar exacto o sea cogen esas actitudes más fáciles...

Y: Que son las drogas y todo eso.

C: No, lo asimilo con las familias de hoy, porque ya los hijos no respetan a los padres, ya quieren eh... ser ellos solos y no quieren escuchar ningún consejo de los padres, ni nada, entonces...

(Source: Audiotape 3, side A, April 7, 2005, p. 41)

In this example, the first student builds on second student's comment by means of the phrase "it has to do a lot" (*"esto tiene que ver mucho..."*). She offers a social reflection arguing that nowadays children share less time with their families



because they face many problems. At the same time, she restates the same idea, but she goes further by specifying one problem, which is drug abuse.

The third student corroborates her partner's idea. She manifests her concern about the lack of respect children show to their parents. She concludes her comment by saying that children do not want to listen to any advice from them. The content of the girls' responses in this sample is a social reflection on one of the problems that most widely affect the society in which they are immersed and are related to the family dysfunction. In general, it shows that first students make connections with their own context, and then they assume a critical position to come finally to a conclusion.

Building different voices and perspectives

A characteristic of the participants' interaction was that they actively listened and relied on other's comments to shape their aesthetic responses. Another salient aspect in their interaction was that they manifested to each other reflections upon their life experiences, present needs or preoccupations and connected them with the book read in each literature circle. Even though my intention was to have students work independently, I noticed that some students were very shy about beginning a conversation or they limited their responses to the prompts. For these reasons, I felt the need to get involved in the discussion so that they could deepen on their responses.

The following example comes from the group who was reading "*The Fall of the House of Usher*", by Edgar Allan Poe. They discussed the prompt: "Compare a un personaje de la historia con usted misma, un amigo, un familiar o alguien conocido" (Compare a character from the story with yourself, a friend, a relative or someone you know).

- C: Pues yo no sé esta comparación... pues... eh
yo pienso que lady Madeline, la comparo como
con de pronto la bondad de la gente y con este mundo,
a veces la bondad de la gente parece que estuviera
muerta y la enterramos, pero de un momento a otro
como que resucita, como que reaparece, y se pone en
escena otra vez, como que a veces cae...

Teacher: ¿Cómo así?

- C: Pues, lo que pasa es que Lady Madeline al
parecer se había muerto, pero entonces ella se levantó
porque no estaba muerta y a veces el mundo en su



afán la bondad de la gente parece que estuviera
muerta...que estuviera...la gente la entierra y la deja a
un lado pero en algún momento reaparece,...pues
como que es la esperanza.

(Source: Audiotape 3, side A, April 7th, 2005, p. 36)

In this reflection, the participant weaves a rich elaboration using symbolism (lines 918-922). She establishes a relation between the character's attitude and the concept of generosity among humans. When I asked her a question to refine her explanation, she was more specific in her comparison between Lady Madeline and generosity. She elaborates an argument biased with emotion that she transmits by means of her symbolism. Her reflection emphasizes human nature in connection to hope.

Conclusions

As students interacted in the literature circles, they reflected critically upon human nature according to their own set of values and their context. When students connected the book they read with their life experiences, needs and concerns they not only questioned or justified people's attitudes, but also acknowledged their own strengths and weaknesses as human beings. All of these connections and reflections constituted the bases of their aesthetic experiences that were built through interactions with their peers and the texts. Students showed here their concerns about the problematic situations of the society in which they were immersed. Such concerns included isolation, racism, drug abuse and lack of family values. They also addressed issues such as generosity among humans and discussed religious stances and, sometimes, they even expressed possible solutions to the problems posed in the stories or discussed by them. Thus, the content of students' responses in this study reflected their thoughts *vis-à-vis* society and their beliefs about it. As Rosenblatt (1983, cited in Connell, 2001) states, "the particular community background of the student will be a factor that will affect the nature of the understanding and the prejudices that he brings to it" (p.94).

One of my main concerns when I started the implementation of this study was that students enjoyed reading. Thus the instructional approach was focused on aesthetic reading to respond to the needs and interests they had. It was also an alternative which took my students to explore books and to learn language differently. This approach also encouraged them to reflect, inquire, make connections, examine possibilities and come to conclusions or to take



a critical position as part of what they experienced when they were reading. But it was through language that students gathered information understood and commented the books, as well as they interacted with their partners in the different groups. So, the efferent stance was also a valuable alternative towards reading which permitted them to express their thoughts, perceptions and sensations. Therefore, I can conclude that throughout the development of this research study I have realized that my participants used to reading both aesthetic and efferent stances.

Conducting this research study has had an impact in my teaching practice. It has been enriching to participate with my students in the process of making meaning. This journey through books has taken me towards different paths as participants manifested their thoughts, perceptions feelings and sensations in the literature circles. It led me to share unexpected connections with their life experiences. As well as I got involved in solving situations that I never imagined. It provided me with the opportunity to listen to my students' voices instead of imposing my ideas on them in order to make learning meaningful. And it also served to lead my teaching practice towards the creation of more supportive environments where the students express freely, take critical positions and become thinkers for life, not only for the English class.

Literature Circles not only foster reading in a more meaningful way, but they also broaden students' horizons. The circles allow them to see themselves and their world through the stories and the characters of the books. Another important aspect is that the reading and discussion of books generate social sensitivity. Nowadays, the world that surrounds our students and more in public schools is marked by violence and apathy. For this reason, I consider that teachers should generate spaces which contribute to fostering debate and interaction among students possible. It is a first step to value participants' interpretations and points of view about their reality and share these with others.

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