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EFL TEACHER TRAINEES' ENGAGEMENT AND PRESPECTIVES IN READING ACTIVITIES THROUGH LITERATURE CIRCLE: A NARRATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, developing effective reading skills among trainee teachers is challenging. This research aims to explore the views and efficacy of the literature circle method as a pedagogical tool to increase engagement and proficiency levels among EFL teachers during their reading activities. Qualitative research methodology, specifically a narrative study design, was used to explore participants' perspectives and involvement in reading activities through literature circles in the context of EFL teaching. The researcher took two participants as samples for interviews and the data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews which were analyzed using content analysis. Research findings show that literature circles have a significant positive influence on engagement, comprehension of texts, and development of social and critical thinking skills of prospective English teachers. Thus, it can be implied that literature circles are a transformative educational tool for trainee teachers, cultivating critical skills, empathy, and collaborative learning. This research has implications for teaching institutions in Indonesia and it is believed that its implementation will further encourage students' interest in reading.

Keywords: teacher trainee, reading engagement, teacher perspectives, Literature Circle, reading activities

INTRODUCTION

In teacher education, engaging prospective teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in reading activities is essential. Sangia (2018) highlights that reading is a powerful tool for obtaining information across various domains, including science, technology, and literature. Additionally, Pustika & Wiedarti (2019) argue that reading is a fundamental skill for language learners, providing necessary input for language acquisition. Habók & Magyar (2019), furthermore, claim that reading improves learners' English skills and overall knowledge. McElvain (2010) states that reading is a

transactional process involving students, texts, peers, teachers, and other people, at which messages and knowledge are exchanged between them. In general, reading literacy also serves as the foundation for achievement across various subject areas within the educational system and is essential for successful participation in broader societal contexts (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Thus, engaging students in reading is a multifaceted process involving cognitive, social, and affective dimensions.

In the process of comprehending the text, readers may utilize models of reading comprehension, such as the bottom-up and top-down models that guide readers through different stages of understanding. The bottom-up model focuses on decoding text sequentially, from letters to words to complete sentences, while the top-down model emphasizes using prior knowledge and cognitive tools to comprehend the text (Hosseini Fatemi et al., 2014). Also, to enhance reading engagement, teachers can use various methods such as pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activities prepare students by activating prior knowledge and setting reading goals (Deyuan & Yufen, 2006). Accordingly, while-reading activities help students verify predictions, organize information, and focus on key ideas; and post-reading activities involve discussions and questions to deepen comprehension and address any difficulties encountered during reading (Ibid). Thus, proficiency in reading, along with speaking, listening, and writing, forms the core of English language acquisition, with each aspect being interrelated and indispensable.

Recent studies highlight a concerning decline in reading literacy among students. Mirantika et al., (2021) notes that a lack of interest in reading adversely affects English learning, reducing the overall knowledge gained. As educators strive to enhance engagement and proficiency in reading, innovative strategies are being explored. One of strategy is the implementation of literature circles, which has shown promise in improving reading comprehension and engagement among EFL learners. Afflerbach (2022) emphasizes the importance of the classroom environment in fostering reading engagement and enjoyment. Creating a supportive and interactive learning atmosphere can significantly enhance students' motivation and engagement in reading activities. Additionally, providing students with a choice of reading materials can increase their sense of control and autonomy, further boosting engagement and achievement, as can be seen in the activity of literature circles.

Literature circles, small peer-led discussion groups where students read and discuss the same text, have been recognized for their effectiveness in promoting reading engagement and comprehension. Daniels (2023) describes literature circles as a strategy that enhances students' reading, critical thinking, and social interaction skills. These groups allow students to take on specific roles, such as discussion leader or note-taker, fostering a collaborative and reflective reading environment. In addition, the literature circles involves students reading a book independently and then gathering in small groups to discuss the content, with each member assuming a specific role to facilitate deeper understanding and active participation (Daniels, 2023). While, Widodo (2016) states that literature circles are groups or reading groups where students can choose their reading material from various genres such as books, articles, poetry, or other types of texts including narratives and procedures. After that, they discusses and forms small groups.

Literature circles align with socio-cultural theory, which posits that social interaction and collaboration are fundamental to learning and knowledge development (Cole & Scribner, 1978). Through literature circles, students engage in meaningful discussions, share perspectives, and connect their reading to personal experiences; thus it enhances their comprehension and critical thinking skill (Morrow & Tracey, 2012). Rosenblatt's Transactional/Reader Response Theory also supports the use of literature circles, as it emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning based on their background knowledge and experiences (Karolides, 2020). That is why Habók & Magyar, (2019) emphasizes that understanding what they read can help students improve their English skills and increase their knowledge of the information they read. It is clear that reading as a communicative activity aimed at interpreting and understanding written

information. So, this activity might become a trigger for student to develop their critical thinking skill.

Several previous studies discusses the use of literature circles as a strategy that result in the impact on the development of English reading comprehension and reading engagement (Julianti, 2018; Karatay, 2017; Talenta & Himawati, 2023; Rahman, 2022). That is not all, Tosun & Doğan, (2020) endeavor the thorough report on the effects of literature circles on not only reading comprehension, but also reading fluency and reader responses. Unlike the previous studies aforementioned, Rokhayati & Alvionita, (2022) use online literature circles as strategy to enhance the students' critical reading skills. Using a systematic review, Ma et al., (2023) found that literature circles is effective in developing English students' language reading ability. However, the studies focusing on the related topic which was carried out using the framework of narrative study is still sparse. As previously mentioned, this narrative case study aims to explore the efficacy of literature circles as a pedagogical tool to enhance engagement and proficiency levels among EFL teacher trainees during their reading activities.

METHOD

The research utilizes a qualitative method, adopting a narrative study design. According to Squire et al. (2014) narrative research encompasses theoretical orientations, topics of study, or methods of investigation and analysis. This study is based on experience-centered and culturally oriented narratives, where participants describe their past experiences, reflect on matters important to them, and offer generalizations or opinions about the phenomenon. Narratives provide insights into how individuals perceive, understand, and define their personal experiences, emotions, and meanings, as well as how they cope with problems (Jencks & Riesman, 2008). The study follows a phenomenological and constructionist approach, suggesting that the social world is constructed through stories, and meanings of social phenomena are understood through interaction within these narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Specifically, a narrative study design is to explore the experiences and engagement of teacher trainees in reading activities through literature circles in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The participants of the study were third-year teacher trainees at one of college in Ciamis Regency. Teacher trainees were chosen due to the study's aim to enhance their engagement in reading activities through literature circles within the EFL context. This selection provided an opportunity to observe their responses to the learning strategy and analyze its impact on their learning. As future educators, these trainees represent a relevant group with the potential to apply the study's findings in their future classrooms, offering significant practical implications for their professional development as English language teachers.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for detailed exploration of participants' engagement in reading activities through literature circles. According to Bloom et al., (2015), interviews facilitate interpersonal communication to obtain verbal answers to specific questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to enable participants to elaborate on their responses while providing a clear guide for the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2013). The researcher interviewed two teacher trainees to gather comprehensive data.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis, which involved coding and theming the interview data. Content analysis enables the creation of new and original themes that emerge from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process included preparing interview results, coding the data, grouping the data to identify trends in responses, and relating the findings to relevant theories. The themes were sorted from the most common to the least common, and the researcher attempted to relate the results to the theories to conclude the findings of the research questions. This method provided a structured approach to manage the large amount of data collected and facilitated answering the research questions effectively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, it was found that Literature Circles were considered effective in encouraging collaboration, deeper understanding, and the development of social and critical thinking skills. The interview results show that Literature Circles have a significant influence on the engagement, understanding of texts, and the development of critical thinking skills of prospective English teachers. Although the frequency of participation may be low, enthusiasm and appreciation for this method remains high, demonstrating great potential in enhancing the literary learning experience in a collaborative and immersive way. Furthermore, Literature Circles have a significant positive influence on the reading skills, text analysis, critical thinking, engagement, and professional development of prospective English teachers. This method increases learning motivation, communication skills, and deep understanding through collaborative learning and in-depth discussions. The following organization summarizes the findings:

1. Background of teacher trainees

The first participant is Teacher Trainee 1 (TT1). Teacher Trainee 1's academic journey began with early education at PAUD at the age of 5, skipping kindergarten and directly entering elementary school at 6. Their journey continued to SMPN 1 Banjaran based on their NEM scores. Throughout elementary and middle school, TT1 actively participated in extracurricular activities such as Scouts and martial arts (*Perisai Diri*). Despite initial reluctance, they eventually embraced English language lessons and achieved a score of 6 in UNBK English.

Transitioning to SMA at Pondok Islamic Boarding School Manahijul Huda Rajapolah Tasikmalaya, TT1 pursued a science track despite lower UNBK scores, inspired by figures like Dr. Zakir Naik. Their journey took a pivotal turn when they became part of OSAMA with a role in the language division, initiating programs to standardize regional languages into national languages within the Islamic Boarding School community. Following collaboration between their Islamic Boarding School and institutions like the Institute of the Qur'an and STMIK Antar Bangsa Tangerang, TT1 initially planned to study System Informatics but was persuaded by Umu to pursue English Education. Currently, studying at Galuh University, TT1 is driven by a deep-seated motivation to emulate figures like Dr. Zakir Naik in spreading Islamic teachings globally.

The second participant is Teacher Trainee 2 (TT2) who developed an early affinity for English through gaming, recognizing its practicality and extensive reach from a young age. This passion led them to pursue English language studies in higher education, initially without considering a teaching career but recognizing the abundant opportunities for the language affords in both academic and professional fields. Motivated by the broad scope and practical application of English, TT2's interest in reading and literature grew alongside their understanding of its cultural and historical significance. They view literature not only as a language-learning tool but also as a means to broaden their knowledge and perspectives (Cole & Scribner, 1978) that can trigger critical thinking and social interaction skills , as said by Daniels (2023) in that reading, critical thinking, and social interaction skills support students 'cognitive.

2. Feelings when first learning about literature circle

Both TT1 and TT2 expressed their initial impressions and sentiments upon encountering the concept of Literature Circle; TT1 found the experience enriching. TT2 shared a similar enthusiasm: "**Discussing literature in small groups seemed like a great way to deepen my understanding of texts and share perspectives with my peers**". Both teacher trainees appreciated the interactive and collaborative nature of Literature Circles, noting its effectiveness in enhancing critical thinking and enriching the learning experience through active discussion and shared perspectives.

The motivations and academic journeys of TT1 and TT2 reflect diverse paths shaped by personal aspirations and educational environments. TT1's journey is marked by perseverance amidst challenges, driven by religious inspiration and a commitment to educational leadership within their community. TT2's path underscores the transformative power of language exploration

and the practical benefits of English proficiency in contemporary contexts. Their shared enthusiasm for Literature Circle highlights its role in fostering collaborative learning environments and deepening understanding through interactive engagement (Julianti, 2018; Karatay, 2017; Talenta & Himawati, 2023; Rahman, 2022) and interactions (Daniels, 2023). This leads to the development of their critical thinking skill.

3. Engagement of teacher trainees in reading activities through the Literature Circle

Based on the interviews conducted with teacher trainees regarding their engagement in Literature Circles, several key themes emerge that highlight their motivations, experiences, preparation strategies, roles, group interactions, emotional experiences, and desires for participation. Here's a synthesized narrative incorporating the essence of their responses:

Teacher trainees participating in Literature Circles express a deep motivation rooted in the method's multifaceted benefits. TT1 and TT2 articulated a strong inclination towards this method due to its ability to enhance their understanding of texts through collaborative discussions. TT1 emphasized that the method fosters critical thinking skills and improves communication abilities, essential for effective teaching practices. **"Improving understanding of texts through collaborative discussions and developing critical thinking skills are the main reasons for using the Literature Circle method)**," stated TT1. TT2 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the method's role in creating an active learning environment that nurtures empathy and cultural awareness. **"The Literature Circle method not only enhances comprehension through discussion but also promotes an active classroom environment**", noted TT2.

Preparation for Literature Circle sessions involve meticulous planning. TT1 described a systematic approach involving group formation, role assignment, and detailed task explanations. "**First, I formed groups of 7, assigned roles, explained tasks, gave time for completion, discussed the readings, and evaluated outcomes**," TT1 explained, emphasizing the structured approach to maximize learning. Similarly, TT2 detailed a rigorous preparation routine involving comprehensive text analysis and thematic note-taking. **"I prepared by thoroughly reading the text, noting main themes, characters, and interesting parts,"** TT2 elaborated, underscoring the importance of understanding texts deeply for effective discussions.

Despite varied participation frequencies, both trainees recognized the method's educational value. TT1 recounted a scenario where he assumed multiple roles due to group constraints, illustrating his dedication to the method despite challenges. TT2, although limited to one session, acknowledged the method's potential in enhancing literary learning. Roles within Literature Circles are diverse and impactful. TT1's experience encompassed directing discussions, linking text to real-life contexts, and analyzing character traits, underscoring his multifaceted contributions. Meanwhile, TT2 focused on visual contributions, enhancing narrative understanding through illustrations.

Group interactions within Literature Circles are characterized by active engagement and collaborative learning. TT1 highlighted vibrant discussions and mutual learning among peers. **"During Literature Circle practice, we actively engaged in discussions, collaboratively asking questions and sharing views**," TT1 shared, reflecting on the dynamic exchange of ideas. TT2 reinforced this collaborative ethos, emphasizing shared perspectives and joint efforts towards deeper textual comprehension. **"In our group, collaborative interactions enhanced our understanding),"** TT2 affirmed, showcasing the enriching dynamics of Literature Circle discussions. Emotionally, Literature Circles evoke profound experiences. TT1 found enjoyment in storytelling and valued interactions with peers, particularly appreciating diverse viewpoints. TT2 highlighted the method's intellectual stimulation, promoting critical thinking and deeper understanding through peer discussions.

In conclusion, Literature Circles emerge as a transformative educational tool for teacher trainees, fostering critical thinking skills (Daniels, 2023), empathy, and collaborative learning. TT1 and TT2's narratives illustrate their profound engagement and the method's enduring impact

on their professional growth and pedagogical perspectives.

4. Perspectives of teacher trainees on the Literature Circle method in reading activities

Literature Circles have emerged as a dynamic approach to fostering deeper engagement and enhancing critical thinking among students, as perceived by prospective teachers undergoing training. TT1 highlighted the method's transformative effect on student skills: **“After I did the literature circle, it had quite an impact on my reading and text analysis skills because our critical thinking became sharper and we were more enthusiastic about learning because we had lots of friends with us”.** This sentiment underscores the collaborative nature of Literature Circles, which not only sharpens analytical skills but also boosts learning motivation through peer interaction. TT2 echoed similar sentiments about the method’s benefits: **"Involvement in the Literature Circle has significantly improved my reading and text analysis skills. Discussing literature with friends has helped me notice details I might have missed and taught me to approach texts from different points of view”.** These insights emphasize how Literature Circles cultivate a holistic understanding of texts by encouraging diverse perspectives and in-depth analyses.

Furthermore, Literature Circles are viewed as transformative in shaping teaching methodologies. TT1 expressed optimism about integrating this method into future lessons: **"I think so. I haven't felt it because I haven't tried applying literature circles in learning”.** This perspective highlights the potential of Literature Circles to enhance learning experiences, contingent upon students' language proficiency. Conversely, TT2 emphasized the method’s tangible impact on their teaching approach: **“Yes, the Literature Circle has influenced my teaching methods by highlighting the importance of collaborative learning. Now, I see the benefits of allowing students to lead discussions and learn from each other, which I plan to implement in my own classes”.** This indicates a shift towards student-centered approaches, with Literature Circles fostering peer-led discussions and collaborative learning environments.

Both TT1 and TT2 underscored Literature Circles’ effectiveness in improving reading skills. TT1 stated, **“Literature Circles are considered very effective in improving students' reading skills because they can increase students' engagement and motivation, deepen understanding because they can share thoughts, develop critical thinking skills, and improve communication skills.”** TT2 concurred, emphasizing how these circles promote active reading, critical thinking, and nuanced critical analyses for robust reading abilities. Additionally, Literature Circles stand out for their ability to cultivate critical thinking and analysis. TT1 outlined diverse strategies within Literature Circles:

> **“There are 5 ways to build students' critical thinking and analysis skills. First, invite students to have in-depth discussions. Second, students listen and consider the views of their friends. Third, invite students to ask critical questions about the text. Fourth, analyze the characters, connecting the text with the real world. And fifth, students build and constructing logical arguments based on evidence.”**

The statement above shows a comprehensive approach underscores Literature Circles’ role in fostering deep engagement and analytical rigor. Similarly, TT2 highlighted how these circles encourage students to explore diverse interpretations: **"Literature Circles promote critical thinking and analysis by encouraging students to dig deeper into texts and consider different interpretations. Group discussions encourage students to justify their opinions and consider alternative points of view, which improves their analytical skills.”** This reflective process enriches students' understanding and appreciation of literary works.

In conclusion, Literature Circles emerge as a transformative pedagogical tool in enhancing students' reading skills, promoting critical thinking, and enriching learning experiences as stated by Daniels (2023). Teacher trainees recognize its potential to cultivate deeper engagement and foster collaborative learning environments, thereby reshaping their teaching methodologies

towards more student-centered approaches. This integrated perspective underscores Literature Circles' efficacy in nurturing holistic learning experiences that transcend traditional teaching methods.

5. Challenges and strategies for the Literature Circle method

It revealed various experiences and strategies applied by prospective English teachers in facing challenges in the Literature Circle, such as TT1 facing limited understanding as the main challenge. He overcomes this problem by bringing English and Indonesian dictionaries, and does not hesitate to ask the teacher or other friends the meaning of words or phrases. **"Limited understanding is handled by preparing English and Indonesian dictionaries, asking teachers or other friends,"** he said.

This challenge is not only limited to understanding the text, but also when trying to express an opinion or understand the views of other members. As added by TT1:

> **"I have difficulty expressing my opinion or understanding the views of other members in using English. Because perhaps my vocabulary is limited, so when I want to express my opinion or understand other people's views, I am confused. The way to overcome this can be by increasing my vocabulary savings."**

In certain situations, such as when listening to the conclusion of a Literature Circle discussion, TT1 felt work harder important to understand the results of the process.

TT2 also faces challenges, especially in understanding special terms and new concepts that appear in the texts they read. He overcame this challenge by reading more related references and discussing with his friends to clarify difficult concepts. **"The biggest challenge is understanding special terms and new concepts. I overcome this by reading more related references and discussing with friends to clarify difficult concepts",** he explained. Sometimes, he also has difficulty expressing opinions or understanding the views of other members. "**Yes, sometimes I have difficulty expressing my opinion or understanding the views of other members. I accomplished this by listening more, asking for clarification, and practicing articulating my ideas with more clarity and structure,"** he said. One situation where it has to work harder is when the text is highly readable and complex. He should reread difficult passages, do additional research, and actively ask questions in discussions to gain better understanding, as claimed by TT2:

> **"There were situations when the texts we read were very complex and I found it difficult to understand the context. I had to work harder by rereading difficult passages, doing additional research, and actively asking questions in discussions to gain a better understanding**".

The researcher can conclude that the experiences and strategies applied by these two prospective teachers show how Literature Circles can challenge but also enrich their learning process, improve communication skills, and deepen their understanding of texts.

6. Teacher trainees' reflection on their involvement and perspectives in reading activities through the Literature Circle

Two English teacher trainees provide in-depth insight into their experiences in the Literature Circle and how it influenced their future professional development. Although TT1 did not provide a direct response, TT 2 expressed a desire to increase inclusion in discussions, especially for students who may be shyer or less confident. They believe that the involvement of all students will create a more inclusive environment and ensure that all voices are heard. *"***I will involve more students who may be more shy or less confident in discussions. This will help create a more inclusive environment and ensure all students' voices can be heard,**"said TT2.

Meanwhile, TT1 highlighted the valuable values of the Literature Circle in forming an

interactive, interesting and challenging learning approach for students. They view the Literature Circle as a method that helps students lead, express opinions, analyze and debate constructively. This creates a learning experience that enriches other people's stories. Their experience in running the Literature Circle provide him very valuable methods to become a more effective and enthusiastic (professional) English teacher. *"***From the Literature Circle, you can indirectly see how students lead, convey opinions, analyze, debate constructively, gain experience from other people's stories,**" said TT1.

From their experience in the Literature Circle, they can conclude that it prepares them to become more effective and innovative English teachers. Through this approach, they see the Literature Circle as more than just reading texts; it is about building skills that will help students succeed inside and outside the classroom and EFL teacher trainees demonstrated a high level of engagement and positive outlook towards the use of Literature Circles in reading activities. They are actively involved in this method with high motivation to improve students' skills in reading, critical thinking, and analyzing texts. The findings also in line with previous studies (Julianti, 2018; Karatay, 2017; Talenta & Himawati, 2023; Rahman, 2022; Rokhayati & Alvionita, 2022; Azizah, 2014; Ma et al., 2023) in that Literature Circles are considered effective in encouraging collaboration, deeper understanding, and the development of social and critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

This research has illustrated the application of the Literature Circle method in reading activities, with a focus on the involvement and perspective of teacher trainees in reading activities through the Literature Circle. This study is divided into five main themes: the first theme discusses the teacher trainee's background, another theme discusses teacher trainee interactions in reading activities through the Literature Circle, the third theme discusses the teacher trainee's perspective on the Literature Circle method in reading activities, the fourth theme discusses challenges and strategies of the Literature Circle method and the final theme is the trainee teacher's reflection on his involvement and perspective in reading activities through the Literature Circle

Future research efforts may provide useful data for further development. This data can help in developing and exploring how to apply the Literature Circle method in reading activities and finding the best solutions. The more we explore, the more solutions we can find to increase student engagement in reading. In addition, this study has implications for teacher trainees and teachers who aim to increase student involvement and collaboration in reading activities using the Literature Circle method. Apart from that, it cultivates the way they think critically, actively and develop each other's ideas or views on what they read. Therefore, we strongly support the use of Literature Circles as a valuable educational method in learning institutions in Indonesia and believe that its implementation will further encourage students' interest in reading.

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