

Implementing Literature Circles as an Effective Close Reading Tool for ELLs

by Aramina Vega Ferrer

Close reading is the careful and purposeful reading of complex text with the aim of analyzing it “under the microscope,” digging deeper into what the author is saying, the author’s purpose, the meaning of the words in context, the structure, and other literary and comprehension considerations. English as second language (ESL) and general education teachers can use literature circles to prepare their English language learners (ELLs) to meet the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts, specifically Standard 10, which focuses on text complexity, the growth of comprehension, and close reading of sophisticated texts.

A literature circle is an effective instructional tool for engaging ELLs in analyzing literary texts consistent with the expectations of the Common Core State Standards. Educators and researchers alike recommend literature circles in the classroom to promote student choice, independence, and motivation in reading (Auger, 2003; Daniels, 2002; Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). The circles comprise small groups of students, purposefully selected by the teacher, to engage in student-centered conversations of the same text, with the aim of critically reading, deconstructing, and analyzing it together. Literature circles are especially effective for ELLs because they learn comprehension strategies through interactions with their classmates in discussions and are encouraged to voice divergent cultural and linguistic interpretations of texts at all grade levels (Farris, Nelson, & L’Allier, 2007; King, 2001; Lloyd, 2004; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000); in addition, they provide ELLs with opportunities to explore critical issues they may encounter in everyday situations and from their own cultures (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005; Samway & Whang, 1996).

Through literature circles, ELLs can analyze and understand complex text in small learning groups assigned to take on the diverse roles of a reader as prescribed by Daniels (2002) and applied by Pam Chandler in her sixth-grade classroom (cited in Brown, 2004, para. 6):

1. The *Discussion Director* develops a list of questions for discussion.
2. The *Literary Luminary* locates special selections from the text that are interesting and worthy of sharing and hearing aloud.
3. The *Word Wizard* identifies some special or important words in the text.
4. The *Capable Connector* identifies different connections readers make with the book.
5. The *Artful Artist* draws a picture related to the reading.

In addition, Daniels’ (2002) optional role of researcher encourages student use of technology. The *Researcher* (or Investigator) digs up background information related to the book’s topic.

Because close reading requires reading a text several times, I present a different model for introducing literature circles in the classroom for ELLs where their first reading is an encounter with a chapter somewhere in the middle of the book. The purpose is to get students’

words attention, and actively engage them in becoming reading detectives, trying to figure out “with a microscope” what is going on, what the story is about, who the characters are, where the action is taking place, and other questions; in this way, students pay closer attention to the and the details in the story. After the students have read the entire chapter, they can go back to the beginning of the book to continue their reading.

I recommend teachers follow the steps given below in introducing literature circles to their ELLs:

- Select an engaging, relevant text and zero in on a rich chapter or section for analysis.
- Introduce the text to the entire class (give choice rationale).
- Activate prior knowledge on the topic (word web).
- Encourage students to use words in their native language (cognates).
- Have students predict what the book will be about from the title and cover design.
- Provide copies of the selected chapter to the entire class.
- Model a think- aloud with the start of the chapter or section (shared reading).
- Make sure to model wonderings about: questions you have, word meanings, personal connections, pictures in your mind, beautiful language.
- Introduce the concept of literature circles to the students and the six reading discussion groups (reader roles).
- Assign students to the discussion groups based on interest.
- Have students continue to read the rest of the chapter in their groups focused on their roles (use graphic organizers).
- Monitor and support discussion groups (scaffolding).
- Have each student group present to the whole class in a circle (sharing).

When introducing literature circles to your ELLs, book selection is paramount. Make sure to choose a book that addresses critical issues ELLs may experience or connect to from their own cultures. For example, I selected *Hatchet* by Gary Paulson. It is on a fifth-grade reading level, but because of its survival theme is appropriate for middle and high school ELLs. Day and Ainley (2008) recommend using high-quality picture books with compelling themes for middle school ELLs to model discussions in mini lessons on “how to talk about a book, to teach reading and decoding strategies, and to give students opportunities to practice conversation” (p. 3).

Once ELLs become proficient and comfortable in taking on all six of the reader roles in literature circles as a whole class, they are able to move on to small-group literature circles, where they can choose their own books independently and build their excitement and motivation in reading and engaging in their student-centered conversations about books. ESL and general education teachers should not hesitate to implement literature circles in their own classrooms as an effective instructional tool for preparing their ELLs to meet the close reading demands of the Common Core State Standards and getting them excited about reading and understanding complex text.

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