Contributions of Literature Circles in Language Learning: Findings from a Systematic Literature Review
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ABSTRACT
This study presents a systematic literature review on the contributions of literature circles based on a number of published researches in several refereed international journals available in various online databases. It aims to identify the contributions on the use of the method to the teaching of Literature among students of various grade/year levels. The data which was plotted on the repertory grid were analyzed to identify the gaps in the researches conducted. The findings of this study suggest that participation in literature circles contribute to the cognitive and affective development and to cultural awareness of language learners. It concludes by noting that literature circles present a strong and promising case for adoption as an approach to the teaching of Literature as they can facilitate the use of literary texts in language classrooms to optimize learners’ cognitive and affective development, likewise strengthen their cultural awareness.

KEYWORDS
Book clubs, inquiry circles, instructional conversations, peer-led discussions, reading comprehension, student-centered approach

1. INTRODUCTION
One student-centered view in teaching Literature that has been gaining popularity in the past decade is the use of literature circles, one of the methods in the Reader Response Theory. Popularized by Daniels (2002), literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups that encourage its members to choose to read the same literary piece which may be a poem, story, article or book then share information to each other about what they have read. Tracey & Morrow (2006) refer to them as individual reading and collaborative learning combined, while Tomlinson & Strickland (2005) describe them as differentiated in as far as pedagogical implementation is concerned. Sanacore (2013) describes literature circles as one that allow and encourage students to include their personal responses in discussions. This student-centered tool is theoretically-based on constructivism and socio-cultural theory (Hsu, 2004) and is believed to foster student engagement in reading, discussion, critical thinking and analysis of literature (Lenters, 2014). During discussion sessions, when students assume roles within their circles, they are given the freedom to develop and practice efficient reading skills and strategies which characterize what good readers do when they read literatures meaningfully.

Daniels (2002) illustrates the following process of conducting literature circles: 1) selecting the book appropriate for students; 2) forming groups; 3) students deciding on the number of pages they will read in a day; 4) distributing the roles; and 5) determining the project type.

In literature circles, teachers remain in the background and perform only the basic controlling functions while group discussions are mainly led by the students (Cameron, et. al., 2012). Examples of five assignments or roles which they assume could be: 1) as the Discussion Director tasked to formulate questions for the group; 2) as the Literary Luminary who may lead the group to important parts of the text to goad them towards a critical analysis of the text; 3) as Illustrator who may provide drawings and sketches for the group to better understand what they read; 4) as the Summarizer who prepares the gist of the text that was surveyed; and 5) as the Vocabulary Enricher who is tasked to provide help in understanding difficult words from the text (Daniels, 2006). The role which each member takes allows them to be more productive and be more focused on the text that they have chosen while supporting each others’ language improvement, more particularly reading comprehension and vocabulary development.

The robust literature on the pedagogical model of literature circles shows that initially, this strategy evolved out of elementary classrooms in the 1980s. This is because the texts usually used are fictional texts. For many years, college instructors resisted for its experimentation arguing that it lacks
sophistication, compartmentalizes reading, disrupts fluency of comprehension and discussion, and may make students dependent on the role sheets (Levy, 2011). However, literature circles have been successfully adapted for use with textbooks and other non-fiction materials while some are experimenting with numerous variations both in content and text. One adaptation done with literature circles is ‘inquiry circles’. These involve student groups who read and discuss informational texts to enhance and extend their comprehension of the topic (Harvey & Daniels, 2009). Recent studies show growing use of this strategy in the university level.

Research into the implementation of literature circles demonstrates their positive impact towards student language learning processes and development. Much of this impact is focused on important areas of language learning such as improvement of comprehension skills, increased their interest and desire for communication (Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Karatay, 2017), improvement of reading attitudes (Bernadowski, 2013) increased student participation, enhanced responsibility and motivation, expanded collaborative discussion (West, 2018, Larson, Young, & Leipham, 2011) development of oral proficiency, increased scaffolding opportunities and reinforced writing skills (Elhess & Egbert, 2015). While these studies outline the positive impacts of literature circles on the reading skills and attitudes of readers, the gap in literature shows that only a few mention the contributions which this method contribute to the cognitive, affective and cultural awareness of students of varying levels.

The current review focuses on the the contributions of literature circles to language learners. More specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What research findings are available about the contributions of literature circles among language learners?

2. What implications to teaching literature can be drawn from these findings?

The discussion of contributions of literature circles among language learners that is elaborated within the context of this literature review is considered particularly important on the basis of the the merits which student-centered methods contribute to student learning. Given the variations made by teachers on the use of the method among different students of varying levels and the multiple aspects of the skills discussed, the results of this current investigation may serve as the basis for a more fruitful conversations in the field of reading education.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in investigating the research questions is the systematic literature review. This particular research method is considered appropriate for its accuracy and reliability of synthesizing existing academic literature (Van Laar, Van Deursen, Van Dijk & Jos de Haan, 2017).

The selection criteria presented in Table 1 were determined before the database search and were used to screen text titles, abstracts and whole texts.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

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<th>Type of criterion</th>
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All the literatures used in this study were pooled from ERIC and Google Scholar databases. The core search terms used were ‘literature circles’ and ‘reading comprehension’. However, a variety of similar terms that are often used interchangeably in the literature were also used. In particular, terms which are similar to ‘literature circles’ as ‘inquiry circles’, ‘instructional conversations’ and ‘book clubs’ were also explored.

The search action elicited 78 results. After excluding the duplicates and texts that did not satisfy the inclusion criteria, 23 texts were critically read in their entirety. These formed part of the systematic literature review in this study from which the themes were culled. All the parts of the articles reviewed were written and organized clearly and in a scientific manner which gave the researcher ease in organizing this review.
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The articles included in this literature review study explored the effects and impacts of literature circles, more particularly their contributions to the language learners’ language development. The analysis of data gave rise to three main themes: 1) cognitive contributions; 2) affective contributions; and 3) contributions to students’ cultural awareness.

3.1 Cognitive Contributions of Literature Circles

Of the different subjects in the curriculum, ‘Literature and Language Arts’ is considered to be one of the most complex. A number of researchers have reported that that this complexity might be caused by the ill-structured domain in which it resides. Young (2014) cites the cognitive flexibility theory of Spiro, Feltovich, and Coulson which postulated that a person could not simply depend on intact schemata or priori knowledge to exhibit advanced knowledge in understanding ill-structured domains such as the free-flowing discussions in Literature classes. It is predicated that in discussions, the learner normally applies various schemata from himself and others making such discussions as inherently complex.

In literature circles, students are immersed in authentic conversation about the reading text in which they are engaged in. They assume roles in fostering personal and most often, divergent interpretations of these texts during the discussion sessions. Latiff Azmi (2010) identified how the ‘soft skills’ as analytical, problem-solving skills, critical thinking skills, communication skills, lifelong learning ability, entrepreneurship and management skills, which are evidences of active learning, are developed in literature circles. He believed that these cognitive skills are what employers regard as important skills in the workplace. Developing these skills through engagement in texts in the Literature class therefore increases the chances of students to be employed upon graduation. Literature circles focus on making the reader an active participant in the creation of meaning while reading a text. This imply that his involvement with the text is undoubtedly aligned with the concept of active learning where he is given more freedom to gain knowledge. This study suggested that literature circles give a great positive impact not only in developing linguistic understanding but also in bringing out active learning strategies of students.

Corroborating these results is the study by West (2018) which looked into the active participation of university students during literature circle discussions. Built on the premise that by engaging students as active learners before class discussion and during the discussion itself, the quality of these discussions are raised leading the students to engagement and deeper learning. Modifying the literature circle model originated by Daniels (2002), this study suggested that the strategy supports the benefits documented by Larson, et al (2011) like understanding texts better, feeling accountable for reading and participating, believing the reading notes have a positive impact on their learning, experiencing more meaningful discussion, and the likeliness of completing assigned reading. Yet, the author noted that the quality of thinking as evidenced in the students’ reflection notes has been strengthened over time as they were engaged in literature circles.

Interestingly, three other reader-response methods which emerged as adaptations of literature circles are inquiry circles, instructional conversations and book clubs. All these methods aim to promote student engagement and higher level of comprehension, while not discounting the affective contributions they give to learners. On the one hand, Avci and Yüksel (2011) pointed out that students who had low level reading comprehension improved their reading comprehension skills after having been engaged in inquiry circles. As a result of belonging to a group, they learned to internalize what they read, discuss even the smallest details with their peers and each page and discuss every point of the text in detail. These led to the improved comprehension of students. On the other hand, Shen (2013) experimented the use of these methods and found that book clubs, literature circles and instructional conversations are beneficial for language learners in regard to high-level reading comprehension.

The impacts of the strategy to students’ comprehension had also been documented by Diego-Medrano, Coneway and Williams (2016) in their exploration of the reactions and perceptions of 98 teacher candidates on their participation in inquiry circles employed in a course on Children’s Literature. They also investigated how the experience influenced the students’ comprehension of an informational text. The result of the study showed that active learning and student-centered instruction provided by inquiry circles are beneficial vehicles to increase students’ understanding of informational texts.

Furthermore, the effects of literature circles on text analysis were also established by Karatay (2017) on his investigation that included prospective teachers of Turkey. He concluded that the strategy contributes to students’ reading comprehension ability in six areas, three of which are related to the cognitive aspect: text analysis, critical reading and speaking abilities.
The other three areas, which refer to the affective contributions, is discussed in the succeeding section of this paper.

2.2 Affective Contributions of Literature Circles

One of the benefits of literature circles which was found in the literature review is the sense of ‘togetherness’ or ‘community’ and a sense of responsibility that is attached to a common goal of members of each group or circles (Bernadowski, 2013). By investigating the attitudes of undergraduate education students engaged in this method, the researcher explains that the commonality of learning and reading goals gives them this sense of accomplishment, aside from being taught about tolerance, responsibility and problem solving.

West (2018) also concluded in her study that when students are engaged in literature circles, they assume accountability for reading and participating in their own groups, yet a benefit they derive from belonging to one is that their belief that reading has a positive impact on their learning is strengthened.

The benefits of literature circles to prospective teachers have also been noted by Diego-Medrano, Coneway & Williams (2016). The study suggested that the use of literature circles is a positive teaching method to utilize in future classrooms of pre-service teachers inasmuch as they provide an opportunity to meaningful practical experience and critical reflective thinking as they prepare to teach children. Complementary to this, the prospective teachers of Turkey investigated by Karatay (2017) also pointed out that the implementation of this strategy increases their interest and independent reading desires and self-confidence. His study suggested that the group reading approach in literature circles was more enjoyable than individual reading and that existing reading habits of students are not only reinforced but also made those who did not have the reading habit into more interested, more willing and more confident readers. This finding runs parallel to that of Avci and Yüksel (2011) who stressed that literature circles encourage positive reading habits.

2.3 Contributions to Students’ Cultural Awareness

Aside from contributing to cognitive and affective development of students, literature circles also offer a number of benefits on the development of students’ cultural awareness. During discussions, members share information to each other, and in some cases with the wider community, about what they have read (Daniels, 2002). It is in these circles where they express their own life experiences and philosophies and relate their own cultures, history and community practices.

Additionally, literature circles work best in curricula where multicultural education is integrated. With a focus on appreciation of cultures and ethnic differences, the curricula can be designed to include high quality books that incorporate themes that develop one’s awareness of different people.

Weisendanger and Tarpley (2010) suggest that one way to help achieve this is through the inclusion of high quality multicultural literature through literature circles. This way, students will view other cultures from a multi-dimensional perspective. An exposure to different cultures can give them deeper meaning about what they read.

The use of literature circles with pre-service and in-service educators is found to be a valuable tool for learning more about the complexity of the contexts in which English language learners lives. By exploring ethnographies to prepare teachers for multicultural/multilingual teaching contexts, Coles-Ritchie (2013) suggests that pre-service teachers begin to appreciate teaching language as a historical, social and political act. This experience is provided them by the richness of the ethnographies that they read which allow them to experience vicariously the context of language learners’ lives. This is very essential as they teach in diverse multilingual and multicultural settings in the future.

Karatay (2017) found that students who come from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds displayed progress and improvement in their efforts to establish interpersonal communication with each other. This finding suggests that literature circles are instrumental in developing tolerance towards cultural and socio-economic differences.

The results of this study revealed that a student-centered approach to the teaching of literature offers a multitude of benefits to language learners. These benefits can be derived from the freedom which students enjoy in selecting the text they read, being engaged in group-discussions which encourage personal responses, assuming roles and responsibilities during these discussions. In the international classroom, the learning and teaching of literature through literature circles vary, yet the benefits that can be drawn from the findings of the studies reviewed in this paper are similar in many aspects. These research literatures all point to the cognitive, affective as well as cultural contributions to language learners as derived from having been engaged in the method.
The cognitive contributions of literature circles were stressed by Latiff Azmi (2010) who suggested that literature circles give a great benefit not only in developing student’s linguistic understanding but also in developing active learning strategies. The ‘soft skills’ of university students such as analytical, critical and problem solving skills, communication skills, lifelong learning ability, entrepreneurship and management skills are presumed to be what employers regard as important skills for potential employees to possess; and active learning as evident in literature circles paves way to these cognitive skills.

West (2018) suggested that literature circles promote understanding of texts better and impact quality thinking. They also give students the feeling of being accountable for reading and participating leading to positive impact on learning, more meaningful discussion, and the likeliness of completing assigned reading.

The improved comprehension of students with low level comprehension was traced to their belonging to a group as they internalize what they read and discuss the big and the small details in a text (Avci and Yüksel, 2011). This contribution to students’ cognitive development was further validated by Shen (2013) who recognized the impact of book clubs, literature circles and instructional conversations in achieving high-level comprehension. Likewise, improved comprehension was also stressed by Diego-Medrano, Coneway and Williams (2016) and Karatay (2017).

As to the affective contributions of the strategy, this literature search was able to synthesize from the readings that literature circles promote a sense of ‘togetherness’ or ‘community’ and a sense of responsibility aside from their contribution to teach about tolerance, responsibility and problem solving (Bernadowski, 2013). The accountability attached to specific roles given to members contributes to the feeling that the strategy has a positive impact on their learning (West, 2018).

As a tool implemented to prospective teachers, its merits lend to it being a positive teaching method to be utilized in their future classrooms (Diego-Medrano, Coneway & Williams, 2016) while increasing their interest and independent reading desires and self-confidence (Karatay, 2017). Pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to refine their construction of knowledge brought about by their experiences in engaging in literature circles, a merit which they can refer to when they themselves become teachers. Other values derived from literature circles include students who are more interested, more willing and more confident readers who make reading as a positive habit (Avci and Yüksel, 2011).

Moreover, a number of benefits on the development of students’ cultural awareness were also identified. The sharing of information by members of a group (Daniels, 2002) was likened to sharing about what they have read with a wider community where expressions of one’s life experiences and philosophies during discussions define cultures, history and community practices. The inclusion of high quality multicultural literature (Weisendanger and Tarpley, 2010) also paves way for students to view other cultures from a multi dimensional perspective. This exposure, provided by the literature circles, gives them deeper meaning about what they read.

The use of ethnographies in literature circles with pre-service and in-service educators is found to be a valuable tool for learning more about the complexity of the contexts in which English language learners live (Coles-Ritchie, 2013). This enables pre-service teachers to begin to appreciate teaching language as a historical, social and political act, an aspect which can be considered very essential as they will teach in diverse multilingual and multicultural settings in the future. On the other hand, students who come from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds who are engaged in literature circles are instrumental in developing tolerance towards cultural and socio-economic differences. (Karatay, 2017).

It is worthy to note that the results of this paper are based on eight (8) studies which adopted a qualitative methodology. While the included studies are represented by three sets of students from the United States, Asia and Europe, the results cannot be generalized as representing the current practice on using literature circles to international students or classroom contexts where English is made as medium of instruction in particular. The number of literatures reviewed which is eight (8) seems to give a very exhaustive representation of the conclusions made in this study. It would also be a remarkable idea to see other studies depicting the international classroom where literature circles are implemented in reading informational and non-fiction texts. It would also be interesting to know what benefits students would derive from the strategy when it is used in other content areas. Thus, it is recommended that more studies that investigate other benefits of literature circles be conducted in diverse contexts, with diverse populations. Lastly, an investigation of additional factors in literature circle discussions can be explored.
to help teachers build instructional design in a manner that would contribute to a holistic development of language learners.

4. CONCLUSIONS
This study investigated findings of literatures on the contributions of literature circles to students in the international arena with the aim of drawing implications to the teaching of Literature to students who live in multicultural and multilingual settings. The results of this study imply that teachers should use literature circles as an approach for practice, as they could generate considerable positive effects. Firstly, students’ cognitive development is positively enhanced as they assume active roles in constructing meaningful interpretations of texts. Not only do they develop student’s linguistic understanding but also active learning strategies and 'soft skills'. Literature circles also impact quality thinking and improved comprehension. This imply the crucial role of a language teacher in selecting classroom materials and adapting procedures that center on students’ learning.

Secondly, literature circles impact affective development as they promote students’ sense of ‘togetherness’ or ‘community’ and a sense of responsibility aside from being taught about tolerance, responsibility and problem solving. These lead to a positive impact on their learning.

As a tool implemented to prospective teachers, its merits lend to it being a positive teaching method to be utilized in their future classrooms and the opportunity provided them as members of literature circles refined their understanding about the need to use this student-centered method. Other values derived from literature circles include students who are more interested, more willing and more confident readers who make reading as a positive habit. The implication that can be derived from this is the consideration of the affective concerns attached to language learning and capitalizing on those that make students engaged, motivated and goal-directed.

Students’ cultural awareness derived from literature circles were also identified in the review conducted. The sharing of their own life experiences and philosophies during discussions define their own cultures, history and community practices. The inclusion of high quality multicultural literature, which gives students deeper meaning about what they read, also paves way to viewing other cultures from a multi-dimensional perspective.

The use of ethnographies in literature circles with pre-service and in-service educators enables them to begin to appreciate teaching language as a historical, social and political act that is extremely complex and difficult but also rewarding, an aspect which can be considered very essential as they teach in diverse multilingual and multicultural settings in the future. This imply that since Literature is a rich resource that identifies the culture of people, it is also beneficial to expose students to other cultures, by way of books and texts, so as to make students be more sensitive to others’ culture and way of life. This will make them more appreciative of their own culture and be respectful of others’

This study, therefore, proposes that there is a strong case for using literature/inquiry circles as the approach to the teaching of Literature as they can facilitate the use of literary texts in language classroom at optimum level. The contributions which this strategy lead to provide a baseline data on the design of an excellent framework for the teaching of Literature that maximizes successful engagement of all students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MELDA UYCHOCO is an Associate Professor in English at the Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University in the northern part of the Philippines. Currently, she is on dissertation stage for her Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education degree at the Saint Louis University in Baguio City. Her research interests include teacher education training, language assessment and TESOL pedagogy. In 2012, she was a recipient of an e-teacher program of the U.S. Department of State and the University of Oregon. She delivered a workshop in the Thai TESOL Conference in 2015 and presented a paper at the CamTESOL in February 2019.

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