

Bir Eylem Araştırması: Edebiyat Gruplarının İlköğretim Öğrencilerine İngilizce Öğretiminde Kullanımı^{1*}

Dilek KÖKLER²

Hülya YUMRU³

Öz

Bu eylem araştırması ilköğretim öğrencilerinin İngilizce derslerinde edebiyat gruplarının kullanılmasının öğrencilere iş birliği, farklı bakış açıları kazanma, yetenekleri ortaya çıkarma, öz güven geliştirme, iletişim ve düşünme becerilerini geliştirme, kelime hazinesi oluşturma ve ayrıntıları yakalama açısından katkılarını gözlemlemek ve bu çalışmayı uygularken İngilizce öğretmenlerinin karşılaşılabileceği olası zorlukları saptamayı hedeflemiştir. Bu çalışma, 2018-2019 akademik yılının ikinci döneminde İstanbul'da özel bir ilköğretim okulunda gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmaya, İngilizce düzeyleri başlangıç seviyesinde olan 18 ilköğretim üçüncü sınıf öğrencisi katılmıştır. Çalışma verileri araştırmacı günlüğü, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler, değerlendirme ölçütleri, öz değerlendirme listeleri ile öğretmen gözlem günlüğünden oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın sonuçları edebiyat gruplarının ilköğretimde İngilizce derslerine uygulandığında öğrencilerin okudukları otantik hikâyelerin düşünme, tartışma ve yorum yapma becerilerinin gelişmesine ve bu hikâyelerin içerdikleri kavramlar ile oluşan edebiyat gruplarında çalışan öğrencilerin de öğrenme süreçlerinin sorumluluğunu alma noktasında ilerleme kaydettiği gözlenmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Okuma, Otantik Hikâyeler, Kavram Bazlı Okuma, Edebiyat Grupları

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² Dilek Kökler, Yüksek Lisans Öğrencisi, İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı, dkokler@gmail.com

³ Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Hülya Yumru, İstanbul Aydın Üniversitesi, hulyayumru@aydin.edu.tr

An Action Research Study: Using Literature Circles in Teaching English To Young Learners

Abstract

Literature circles are small, peer-led discussion groups whose members chose to read some stories, while reading each member takes notes and later everyone comes to the group with ideas to share. Each group follows a schedule for reading and meeting, holding regular conversations on the way through the book (Daniels,2002). Peer-led literature circles provide learners with an outstanding opportunity to familiarize themselves with authentic stories while working collaboratively in groups by establishing rules for responding and discussing and keeping on-task communication to reflect their understanding of what they are reading.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the benefits of using literature circles with young learners such as familiarizing themselves with authentic stories while working collaboratively in groups by establishing rules for responding and discussing and keeping on-task communication to reflect their understanding of what they are reading in EFL settings.

Besides, it was an attempt to find out the possible challenges the teachers may experience in implementing literature circles in English lessons. The study was conducted in the second term of 2018-2019 academic year at a private primary school in Istanbul, Turkey. The participants in the study were 18 third grade beginner language proficiency students. The data of the study was collected by using Observation diary, Semi-structured interviews conducted with the students, Rubrics, Checklists and Reflection papers (Heart Maps). The findings of the data indicated that the students were exposed to authentic language that contributed to their learning while the use of age appropriate text also gave students the chance to connect and discuss their connections with peers. The students also identified with both the characters and events that increased their motivation to continue reading. Finally, it was observed that the learners liked choosing their own books, roles and projects.

Keywords: Reading, Authentic Short Stories, Concept-based reading, Literature Circles

INTRODUCTION

There have been serious discussions about how to nurture the natural interest of students and how to use their cognitive skills with the help of short stories. As Broughton & Brumfit (1980) describe learning a language includes not only obtaining some grammar and vocabulary and a sensible pronunciation but it also involves acquiring the ability to adapt the language to the circumstance, the participant and the fundamental purpose. Most language teachers are not aware of the fact that stories are quite beneficial to fulfil all requirements in learning English and fail to give a value of literature to their students. The idea of literature circles has been used lately, but it is hardly implemented in EFL classrooms. In literature circles, the members of small reading groups perform their roles that lead to peer-led discussions based on what is read. For students, as Daniels (1994) describes it, it is falling in love with the books that the students have read and having a pleasure to talk about them with their peers in small groups.

In her analysis, McKay (1982) states that despite the aim to use literature to teach language use, fewer people have used it to improve their language skills. There has been increasing concern over the texts we use as materials for EFL students. Using authentic materials to foster foreign language learning have received much attention over the past twenty years. Widdowson (2003) focuses on authenticity and he states that the idea is related to communicative language teaching and he also underlies that contrary to the popular belief authentic texts are not tricky to deal with in language classrooms as long as we know how to integrate them to our lessons and use them as a tool to improve language skills. Widdowson (1996) also points out that authenticity becomes real when we prioritize communicative behavior in our classrooms, and it happens instinctively when we value the students' own experiences in the process of learning. Related research indicate that children are natural language learners. They adopt language fast and efficiently when they are provided with an authentic environment and engaging materials. Current trends focus on this fact and literature has become something that has been widely accepted as a tool to encourage students to respond using a rich language, to involve in discussions reflecting their own experiences.

Back in the early 1980s, some teachers from Chicago aimed to develop the reading-writing approach (Daniels, 2002). Those teachers started to implement literature circles to endorse especially reading and reflecting skills that comprise speaking and writing in their classrooms. After twenty years, literature circles have still been implemented in many schools with both native and bilingual students. Another EFL teacher/researcher Furr (2004) tried literature circles with Japanese students, and according to Furr, those students were able to become incredibly active with the help of literature circles by sharing their ideas in English. Although, Furr altered the first four principles of the method for applying it to the EFL schools, they still conducted their discussions in English. Despite the growing importance attached to the communication skills of students, English language teachers in Turkey usually favor explicit grammar teaching and rely too much on artificial texts in the course books. Although a large number of English teachers appreciate the advantages of the communicative approach, many Turkish language teachers tend to give less importance to using authentic texts to give their students meaningful input. It is not always easy for teachers to use authentic materials such as stories for various purposes such as administrative decisions, wrong book choice, but mostly lacks understanding of how to use stories to teach English. Implementing literature circles is, likewise, an innovative idea for language teachers in Turkey.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was designed as an eight-week action research study. As described by Burns (2010), action research aims to identify an issue as part of a class or a problem area to bring about changes and improvements in practice. Action research helps the teachers to become researchers as well to provide solutions to the problems that they identify in their teaching. During action research, the teachers are engaged in reflections about their teaching practices. Those reflections are mostly ongoing evaluations. Burke (2014) argues that many formative or ongoing assessments are not graded, but instead are used as feedback methods to support students to enhance their work before the summative assessment. This study employed qualitative data collection instruments.

The context and the participants of the study

This action research study was conducted in the spring term of the 2018-2019 academic year at a private School in Istanbul, Turkey. The school offers twelve hours of English courses a week. Purposive sampling strategy was used when choosing the participants of the study. I believe that choosing participants purposefully help the researcher determine the problem and the research questions. Burke (2014) states that the teachers must prepare the students carefully for anything about the study before, during and after the study. I tried to do so by informing them our objectives comprehensively to make sure they do not feel isolated. The participants of the study were a total of eighteen Grade 3 students studying in the same class. They were at the age of nine with no habit of speaking English to interact with neither the teacher nor each other.

Data Collection Instruments

The data of this study were gathered from five instruments. These instruments involved Observation diary, Semi-structured interviews conducted with the students, Rubrics, Checklists and Reflection papers (Heart Maps). I preferred to choose those instruments to see how the transitions take place in my lessons, and they helped me to build up my next lesson plan with new possibilities for classroom practice. The data also played an important role to evaluate my teaching to identify the weak and strong points. In other words, the data indicated me what was happening or what was not happening in my class. Richards & Farell (2005) argue that journals help teachers record events in their classrooms, and they provide the teachers with new perspectives of how learning takes place. An observation diary also shows the students' attempts to take their responsibility in learning and their production of language. I used my observation diary to make regular entries to reflect on what was going well or not in my class in terms of teaching and learning English in order to build my next lessons.

The second data collection tool was semi-structured interviews conducted with the students. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), semi structured-interviews involve a set of instructions given to the interviewers to get reliable qualitative data. Burns (2010) expresses that while preparing questions, we should consider some flexibility in line with how students respond to the prompts that they are given. These informal interviews

can help students develop their social and emotional skills. They are also helpful in making students feel that their thoughts and feelings are valuable and necessary to build a learning community. Having interviews with students is useful for me to see how to help them in their diversity and flexibility in the learning process. The students who I had interviewed were chosen randomly to provide a framework for the research. Semi-structured interviews included three questions to elicit their experience in reading and performing their roles in literature circles.

The third data collection tool was rubrics. Rubrics were used to measure the student's attitudes, and their level of participation in discussions. In addition, the students were given rubrics to evaluate their performance in literature circles. My aim to use rubrics was to guide the students to assess themselves and take their learning responsibility. I also let the student's assess their attitudes towards reading by using age-appropriate rubrics. I view the rubrics as indicators of my students' learning process, and these rubrics make a positive contribution to the learning environment, therefore they should be the subjects of formative assessment in many stages of learning. Since rubrics are made up of established criteria for evaluating students, I used them not only to evaluate their performance, but also to identify their reading skills during learning in different periods. Rubrics help the students clarify expectations and provide opportunities for self-assessment, and feedback and they also allow students to improve their future assignments. My first rubric was to get their reflection of reading books individually, and I saved them from comparing with their latter performance and thinking.

The fourth data collection tool was checklists. Burke (2014) also points out that checklists help students get organized and show them what to do next. It is beneficial to guide their thinking.

I applied the checklist with the comment sections during reading aloud time and literature circles and gave feedback instead of grades. Checklists also helped me to see the student reflections of their learning target and learn how the students are achieving their goals. Hall & Burke (2009) point out that formative indicators such as checklists show how students extend and deepen their learning.

The fifth data collection tool was reflection papers in the form of heart maps. Heart Maps were used as reflecting documents to show the students' thinking skills and also basic language competence by engaging them in writing and speaking activities. Heard (2016) claims that heart maps are to encourage the students to go into what is essential for their lives and to be a volunteer to tell what they keep in their hearts.

Instructional Intervention

The goal of the eight-week literature circles instruction was to give the students an opportunity to take their own responsibility through reading and working collaboratively and actively interacting with peers using major skills while trying to connect with the assigned reading.

Before implementing literature circles, I planned to apply reading aloud lessons with literature response strategies to encourage the students to read an authentic book and reflect on it. The first two lessons were devoted to reading aloud and book discussions to encourage them to express their views on both the book and life. Serravallo (2010) points out that when a teacher or an adult reads a book aloud, the level at which children can understand the written text is much higher than when the child reads it alone. In order to have a successful read aloud session, I always try to choose a book slightly higher than the students' language proficiency level as long as the content is age appropriate and exciting enough to keep their attention. The book that I had chosen for this purpose was *Dog Breath* (Pikley, 2014). The book has an easy plot to encourage the students to make connections with their own lives. During the first week, I observed that the story and my reading style triggered a noticeable increase in the students' level of participation in the lesson. In the next two lessons, I disturbed the copies of *Dog Breath* and we started to read the copies of the book silently for ten minutes. While they were reading the story, I monitored them and took notes for my observation diary. Then I provided them with the reading rubrics and presented them with several strategies to reflect on what they had understood from the book. *Storyboard*, *Venn diagram*, *Visualization* and *A letter to one of the characters of the story* were chosen by students. According to Pritchard (1993), the goal of using responsive strategies is to help our students to develop a basis for reflection and interpretation and help them to see what they bring to the texts from their own experiences and emotions and what the text makes them feel and

believe. I showed them how to do brainstorming by modelling the strategy and also encouraged them to make a mind film of the story to elicit the vocabulary of the text in the mini lesson.

I wrote these words on an Anchor Chart, which I usually use as a reminder of the lesson or unit process. Next, I let them draw at least two target vocabulary items on their journals then they explained those words to their partners using basic level of English. I signaled them to change their partners. Each student had two partners during pair work session. A reading checklist was provided in terms of ongoing assessment at the end of the week. During week five and six I encouraged the students to express their views on the story and its concepts such family, environment, animals and health. Then, I introduced to the students the roles to be taken in literature circles. I scheduled those lessons to present literature workshops. The first lesson would allow the students to get to know the books precisely, and then they would understand exactly what their tasks are in their groups, not just their own tasks, but also other students in their groups. I explained why I placed them together in the mini-lesson, I wanted the learners to understand what the literature circles were and how they would do to accomplish their duties. I also wanted to make it clear that, while carrying out their duties, all the steps would be taken on their own. Four roles were explained to them explicitly and I allowed them to ask any questions about the roles and before choosing their tasks. According to Daniels (2002), if we have small temporary groups in our classrooms, we should let the students form their groups based on the book selection. He also claims that that students must learn to select their materials to read, and this is an essential aspect of literature.

The Roles in literature circles in Grade 3:

Word Hunters: They study and discover some words that are essential or useful to them, they are marked by Word Hunters and discover meanings of these words.

Golden Line Writers: Their duties are to identify the plot's significant sections and write them down to summarize the text.

Question Makers: Their task is to create big questions about the book and ask their groups members these questions in order to create a discussion.

Illustrators: They are responsible for illustrating only one large picture that represents the whole concept of the story.

By picking up the ideas, they stated their opinions and formed four groups according to their selection of the concepts. The groups were made up of four and five learners. I selected the books for all groups covering many different topics and they began reading the books extensively and quietly in their boxes during the entire class.

Extensive reading is described by Furr (2004) as the successful combination of intensive text reading and fluency building. Daniels (2004) suggests a similar strategy by giving the teacher the responsibility to select books in which the activity was first introduced. Since the learners had not earlier been involved in literature circles, I offered them several thin authentic books which were both fiction and non-fiction with various copies and these books covered several “stages” of reading, including various fields of student interest. They spent the last two lessons by working in their literature circles. Although it was a structured literature circles, the group works don’t rely on worksheets, but I had a conference with the group members to facilitate their initial discussions. First, they decided which book they would choose to use for their collaborative work. The students were told that they initially had to reach an agreement on which book they would study on and then they started talking about how they could do the work-sharing with my guidance. After they had decided the roles of the circles groups, the students started scanning the book to recall the plot and the characters again. A reading rubric was issued at the end of the week. As I was visiting groups I noticed that they were engaged in their group discussion while supporting each other. Furthermore, I attempted to ask them some questions to help all the group members understand every detail of the story and connect it with their own life in the belief that this would help them to understand the concept they were studying. For instance:

What is the most interesting animal for you? Why? (Animals)

What do you do usually when you visit your grandparents? (Family)

What made you amazed about the characters in the book? (Feelings)

The students finished their work and all the groups presented their posters to each other. I used a signal for this process to manage the sharing time.

They changed their partner groups when they heard my signals and matched with other groups. After that, they accepted some questions from their classmates. Finally, I asked them to check how many new words they used in their posters. My aim was to help them to be aware of their vocabulary learning. In the reflection time, they tried to give feedback about the lesson and their feelings or thoughts. Some of them wanted to write or draw their feelings or thoughts about literature circles. At the end of the class, the checklist was provided to allow them to represent their feelings about their group performance.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analyses of the data gathered from the observation diary revealed that the first encounter with reading aloud was crucial and exciting for the students. In the first week, I observed that their curiosity became dominant because they were about to explore something unknown. Since the first impression colored their feelings, they found themselves engaged with a mixture of excitement and curiosity. Judging from their reactions, the book choice for the read aloud was successful. The book discussions indicated that their speaking ability was not high, although their comprehension level was better. They weren't communicating with their teachers and each other in English. My persistence to communicate with them in English might cause a little bit reluctance to join in discussions at the beginning. On the other hand, despite some ice breakers, it was not easy for them to accept me as a teacher with whom they had no previous learning experience. Besides, they did not have a circle time habit for reading time and reading to them by the teacher. First of all, I had to make a classroom agreement to develop a productive learning environment because they seemed to have no rules in the classroom. I noticed that as soon as I shared with them some parts of my private life, such as my dog and my adventures, they lowered their barriers and became more attentive and willing to join. Animal love was the fundamental concept that made them speak as much as they could. It also created a basis for the story used for reading.

In two lessons during the first week, I observed that the story and my reading style triggered a noticeable increase in their participation in the lesson. They somehow stuck to the rules of the classroom we created together, and for the next lessons, it was promising. I also noticed that not being corrected while talking encouraged them to try to express their views

in English. According to my initial observation, it was clear that none of the students had experienced neither read aloud nor concept-learning literature circles. So, I postponed asking them to think the questions, and I just encouraged them to express their opinions about the characters and the plot in the first week. At the end of the first week, I didn't finish the book to sustain their curiosity for the next reading aloud.

In the second week, I observed that most of the class had limited vocabulary knowledge and was inevitable to practice the keywords while reading the rest of the book. When I was crafting the lesson, I thought prediction time would be challenging for them, but actually, they were quite productive to predict the end of the book. The whole class understood all the story elements, which was a little bit surprising for me when I compared their performance with the previous week. Although four students could not answer any personal questions to connect with the story, many of the students were able to answer my question in order to make a connection with the story. Furthermore, the majority of the class tried to offer solutions to the characters to solve the central conflict in the story. I noted that they had enough self-confidence to involve in book discussions despite their limited vocabulary knowledge. I gave them a heart map to get familiar with their inner world and also to assess their writing skills. They found it a little bit hard to travel to their own heart and reflect it. They seemed that they had no habit of thinking deeper. I assume it was just a matter of not being used to it. There were a few students who couldn't comprehend the purpose of heart map, but their reflections were welcomed as well.

On the third week, I wanted them to be familiar with responding literature. It could also be a distinguished preparation for the literature circles as well, as they would learn to think deeply about what they read. The silent reading session went well, and they didn't ask for my guidance. I observed that they were all engaged in reading but explaining to them the strategies to respond to a book took time. Despite the whole class explanation, I had to visit each group to re-explain each strategy to make sure they all knew what they were doing. When they were asked to connect with the events in the book or illustrate their reactions to what happened in the book, a few students were able to do that. After explaining how to fill out the checklist, they tried to do that with my guidance; I noted that it was acceptable as it was the first time they experienced a self-assessment tool.

The revision of the target vocabulary did not work throughout the class on the fourth week. Although there were some pairs to follow the instructions successfully, most of the class could not do well either because of the lack of linguistic knowledge or unsuccessful time management. On the other hand, the brainstorming for target vocabulary was successful in producing a lot of vocabulary, but again I didn't get any questions about the meaning of the unknown words, but what caught my attention was that, despite their lack of vocabulary, they were good at trying to express their opinions. I noticed that they quickly got the idea of how we transformed words into concepts. According to what I noted in my diary, they could be helped by providing them with a few responsive strategies according to their understanding and linguistic level since they had no chance to practice using more strategies for some time. Several students wrote some other words from the book after letting them add more words from time to time, but not the whole class contributed to that activity. In the second lesson, their participation in forming the concepts was very high, and they were sure which concepts they would work on. Their reflections of the Dog's Breath was quite promising in terms of both in-depth thinking skills and linguistic competence.

On the fifth week, they were much better to follow my instructions and fulfil their tasks. According to my observation, they failed to use most polite conversation starters except "I agree," and "I don't agree." But when I used them it was evident that they knew what I meant. Anchor Chart was useful in reminding them of our lessons process and vocabulary when they had trouble in finding the right words to complete their sentences for both oral and written tasks. When I introduced the aim of the literature circles, I observed that they seemed they were puzzled rather than excited. That's why I thought it was necessary to give them plentiful examples from Dog's Breath to make the process more manageable.

For them, the following week was uncomplicated. The students were delighted to choose the boxes of the box. They were excited because they were given a lot of choices to do extensive reading for the first time. The next step had to be the revision of the concepts, and the groups had to be formed to read about the concept they had selected. Most of the class was excited to read the books, but some of the students skimmed a book and got another. I did not interfere with any groups, and I let them enjoy

reading. In the last lesson of the week, the students were given checklists to assesses their attitudes toward books and reading.

Nearly half of the class consciously selected their roles in the seventh week, but the rest of the students seemed to be confused about what to choose. Most of them found the task illustrator was appealing and easy, so they were eager to be a volunteer to perform it. It took time to convince them that the other roles are exceptional and workable. The hesitant ones certainly chose their tasks after my constant guidance and the support of the other group members. I firmly believe that allowing them to choose their roles with their own will enables them to take responsibility for their learning and thus develop their autonomy and learning motivation. While discussing which book to work on, I noted that one or two students incidentally became group leaders and the other group members accepted their leadership. I didn't involve in their decision process to allow them to listen to the others politely and respect their opinions. I thought it was a life skill to acquire; they had to find a way to find a common ground. After deciding how to share the poster, they started working on it, and I noticed that they would have performed much better if they had a better command of English.

I think their intellectual capacity was quite sufficient to fulfil their tasks, although it was entirely new and a little challenging for them. I was pleased to see that they realized that I was no longer an instructor, but I was facilitating the acquisition of English.

Their adventure continued in literature circles in the last week of my research. Even though they had difficulty in leaving a task unfinished but keeping it for the next lesson, the students continued their group performance. I visited each group to assist poor performers in their duties. The ones who asked for my advice were responsible for making the questions because this task usually requires a lot of linguistic ability. I thought it was essential to convince them that we focus on efforts and progress not on accurate grammar-based results. Since we had limited time, I asked them to visit each group and allowed them to present their posters to their classmates, by doing so I let them listen to each other and learn from each other. I would also like to point out that my research didn't pursue the original design of literature classes for EFL students, but instead I modified it to

adjust it to the class I worked with. It means that I tried to craft each lesson according to the students' current knowledge and needs. When Daniels (1994) first began introducing literature classes with a team of teachers, he argued that the need to assign a new role to each student is crucial to enable them to experience the text from different angles. That's why I often let them perform a different task for the next meetings in the literature circles, but I couldn't apply it in my research because of the time constraints.

CONCLUSIONS

The study showed that literature circles have the potential to create a positive and productive learning environment where a high number of students become motivated and involved in reading lessons. This is extremely important for language learning. During my research, I observed that having meaningful and real conversations help students to become more confident and attentive in speaking activities. The concepts that were used during the study provided a solid basis for our discussions. In addition, involvement in group work encouraged the students to start thinking deeply to reflect on their feelings and opinions despite their poor language skills. Another significant point is that they got used to the concept of collaborative work and teaching. It was pleasing to see them helping each other and understand and reflect on the book that they had chosen. Their love of reading and the ability to think about the book in many aspects increased. As the reading groups and the roles were performed based on their choices, they enjoyed reading and expressing their opinions about what they were reading. I believe that this feeling made them make choices about their learning. It was noticeable that the students were delighted to see that their views were valued by both the teacher and their classmates. My last remark is that literature circles are also meaningful and enjoyable opportunities for struggling and unwilling learners as I observed their attempt to contribute to group work.

The findings of the study also demonstrated the appropriate support in improving their linguistic competence. Since I needed evidence to craft lessons for my research, I conducted my observation diary throughout the study as well as reading rubrics, checklists after each group work and finally I had a semi-structured interview with them last week. The results showed me how to settle for the next lesson with their weak or sharp points and also draw conclusions from the study. Since the idea of self-assessment

was new to them, they were not meant to do it at first, but once they got used to it, the majority of the students could sincerely assess themselves. Not all of them, but some students were volunteering to answer my questions at the end of the study when I conducted a semi-structured interview. The boys didn't want to do that due to the possible lack of self-confidence. Next, they were very supportive of each other as they practiced in their groups was satisfying. They were thoughtful during the study and showed tolerance to the members of the group. The last point I would like to point out is that they did not interestingly often refer to the vocabulary list I gave them, but they tried to use what they knew. I assumed that the strategy was entirely new to them, so they ignored the list. I discovered that, in relation to enhanced motivation, students worked together to understand the text. Instead of reading a book and answering a number of questions, the students followed their group roles to expand their vocabulary, create questions, and establish connections as much as they could. Finally, I observed that the students started to relate their personal experiences to the characters and the events in their book once they established a trusting connection. Some links were deeper than others; however, it was obvious that the students knew they could speak about anything freely.

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