Literature Circles Strategy as a Support for EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Skills and Motivation

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.31973/rcwrad46

ABSTRACT:

The current study aims to explore the impact of using literature circles strategy on supporting EFL college students 'reading comprehension skills and motivation towards reading. Literature circles strategy is an activity in which the students meet to discuss and react to a text, book or short story which they are reading together. This research is an experimental one in which thirty college students in the experimental group were taught the short story (The Dolle's House) by using the literature circles strategy, whereas the other thirty students in the control group were taught the same short story by using the conventional method. To achieve the aims of this study, an observation checklist of reading comprehension skills and a questionnaire of motivation toward reading have been administered by the researcher to get the necessary data. The findings reveal that the experimental group's students performed better than the control significant group's students with differences favoring experimental group that was exposed to literature circles strategy. Pedagogical implications for EFL college teachers are presented their students' and improve language learning enhance by incorporating the literature circles strategy in EFL classrooms especially in teaching short stories and novels to support students 'reading comprehension skills and motivation toward reading.

Keywords: Literature Circles Strategy, Reading Comprehension Skills, Motivation

*The authors has signed the consent form and ethical approval

Introduction

Reading permits access to the generation of thoughts, to a large number of facts and to the images of the world far from our daily experience. It plays an essential role in education as the ability to read fluently is used as an indicator of more general intellectual ability. This tendency is as Traves (1994: p92) states "is part of the function ascribed to literacy, albeit one we need to resist and reform ".

Encouraging discussion based on social and cultural aspects of the students through reading a text is the goal of all language instruction. One cannot also ignore the importance of reading as we are all need to be capable of reading in our first language whether from document, mobile devices, computers, or books. The learners of the English language also need to read all these things in English. Besides, reading will assist them in learning and acquiring English.

Most research works have found that the foreign language is learned more effectively when the learners have different opportunities for practicing real communication as assures by Krashen (1981). They then must learn the literary, social and cultural skills to be good communicators in the foreign society, though most English language teachers lack the necessary techniques or methods that assist the learners in developing or supporting literary skills and strategies. (Beckelt and Haley, 2000).

There are many instructional methods for assisting the English language learners improve their overall language proficiency and reading comprehension in particular. It's also very essential for the English language teacher to find activities or methods that encourage discussion based on the social and cultural aspects of the students. Recent evidences and studies demonstrate that working in literature circles groups might be considered as one of these methods or opportunities as indicated by Nagy and Townsend (2012) who mention that literature circles may provide the students with good chances for social interaction and communication with issues or Souvenir (1997) asserts that the students affairs important to them. will have more opportunities for practicing oral skills which may help them more in developing their oral proficiency through the meaningful oral discussions that happen in literature circles. The significance of using literature circles is also being indicated by King (2001) who states that this strategy might provide the students with social and cultural skills that enable them to be more critical thinkers when they read independently. Therefore, it has become very crucial to incorporate this strategy in our Iraqi EFL learning classroom as made by this study. In this vein, this study is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is the impact of implementing literature circles strategy on the EFL college students 'reading comprehension skills?
- 2 -What is the effect of implementing literature circles on EFL college students' motivation toward reading?

Hypotheses of the study.

- 1- There are no differences of statistical significance between the mean score of the experimental group and the mean score of the control group on the observation checklist of reading comprehension skills.
- 2- There are no statistically significant differences between the mean score of the experimental group and the mean score of the control group on the questionnaire of motivation toward reading.

Literature review

2-1 Definition of Literature Circles

Literature circle, as defined by Daniels (2002) is an activity in which the students meet to discuss and react to a book or text which they are all reading. It is then a strategy which aims at engaging the students in reflection and critical thinking through reading, discussing and responding to a text. Cameron et al. (2012) add that literature circles are mostly led by the students and the teacher stay in the background and carry out only main control functions. Many roles are assigned to the members of the literature circles to permit the groups to function in the productive way and to assist the members remain focused on the chosen text or book.

The five roles assigned to the students are discussion director, literary luminary, illustrator, summarizer, and vocabulary enricher. The task of the discussion director is to develop at least five questions about the chosen text and then share these five questions with the group. The literary luminaries' task might be to pinpoint the most important parts of the text to the group for the purpose of stimulating thinking and eleciting some of the interesting facts about the text. The job of the illustrator could be to draw pictures relative to the reading and share the drawing with his group, the members of the group then meditate on the meanings of the pictures and link them to their own ideas about the text. The role of the summarizer is to recall what has happened in the reading and provide a summary for the group. The job of vocabulary enricher is to help the group find and discuss the difficult or new words (Daniels and Steineke 2004). In this concern, it is necessary to mention that these roles can interchange within each discussion so that every student will have the opportunity to carry out each role.

As Maloch (2002) explains, the groups of literature circles are promoted or boosted as a more engaging and equitable method for the students to share and discuss their responses to literature. The format of the small group is usually from four to six members and every member is allowed to be an active participant to share ideas and construct interpretation.

It should be noted that the small groups of literature circles strategy differ from those in a normal guided reading in many aspects as they can be heterogeneous groups that formed around students 'interests. They usually focus on students 'thinking skills of the higher level, the intent of the author, style of writing, characterization, etc.

2-2 Implementation of literature circles

Literature circles, as mentioned by Noll (1994) are also known as book clubs, literature discussion groups or readers' circle. They are small groups of students who meet with the aim of discussing a chosen theme, topic, book or text. The key to successful literature circles is the choice of good books or texts. This entails that the teacher should select texts of high quality that help to enrich the students' learning through reading and discussing the book or text (Fountus and Pinnell, 2001).

When the groups of students are formed and the books or texts are chosen, the students start developing a routine for implementing their literature circles. Daniels (1994) explains that literature circles should regularly schedule and continuous throughout out the whole school year not just as an occasional treat. The students then can read the text and respond on one day and take part in the literature circles on the alternative day.

Once the students finish reading the assigned text, they should respond to what they read. Most teachers use role sheets for the students to respond to what they read. The students are usually assigned to one role, such as discussion director, illustrator, connector, vocabulary or word finder etc. They fill out these sheets of role and reflect on their reading. During the discussion, the students start sharing their reflection in their respective roles and this will motivate them to be involved in their reading and be responsible for their own role.

It is worth mentioning that the students can choose to respond without using the role sheets. In this respect, Daniels (1994) states that role sheets are usually neglected or disused when the groups of the students are able of test – centered, lively, multifaceted book discussion that drawn from open – ended entries.

The most successful strategy for the implementation of literature circles as mentioned by Baker et al. (2001), is the gradual release of responsibility as in this strategy, reading instruction starts with the most supportive instructional technique which is the teacher read - aloud and this allows him to choose the text and lead discussion. Through discussing the text or the book, the teacher models how to ask thoughtful and genuine questions about the text. This process of modeling questions will continue over about five or six weeks and with several genres of texts. The students are then ready for guided reading which allows them to read the book or text with less support and the teacher still lead or guide the majority of the discussion. In the final stage, the students become ready for literature circles, i. e the students will become more independent and responsible in choosing the text, reading it and using suitable comprehension strategies to answer the questions that relate to the text.

Concerning the main three elements that are brought up together in literature circles, Fountas and Pinnell (1994) explain them as firstly, the shared experience that allow the students to elevate or put up understanding together. Secondly, the provision of a rich text to the students which can supply them with the chances to form interpretations across the categories of meaning. Thirdly, the personal response of each student which is very essential to the discussion. They (ibid) also add that the main methods in which the students can explore meaning are: talking, reading, writing and visual and performing arts. All these means are very important for establishing the foundation of literary analysis. The students often use more than one method of expression to examine or check the meaning of the text. However, the central path or method which is used in literature circles is talking.

The important thing to mention, as illustrated by Daniels (2006) is that expecting the students to have the required skills for sustaining conversations around the chosen text that they have all read is a big expectation. Therefore, different structures, scaffolds or support need to be explicitly explained and modelled by the teacher before letting students work independently to facilitate these extended and rich conversations. The need for these scaffolds or supports will scatter when the students of the groups become experienced in meeting in these conversations.

2-3 Types of literature circles

There are many types of literature circles that can be implemented or incorporated in every learning classroom. Among these types that are suggested by King (2004) are the following:

1- Basic literature circles.

They are very flexible in that the learner chooses his or her text or book based on reading ability and personal preferences. In this type, the students can read alone or in small groups. When the students read the text, they write some questions or topics for discussion in a journal or on sticky notes. It's important to mention that the group of meeting of discussion also contains such activities as creating graphic organizers or symbolism or finding imagery in the text or the book.

2-Modified literature circles.

They are often used with struggling readers who cannot keep up with the fast move or pace of literature circles to make them more successful. Shorter texts or books are often used in this format and the students meet daily with their teacher. The students take part in some reading aloud as well as reading in independent way. After reading, the teacher usually sits on in the meeting to assist his students by clarifying the main ideas and the words that may be confusing to them.

3- Literature circles with roles

They provide the students with the means that help them lead a self – regulated or directed discussion about the text or the book they are reading. The main roles of this type of literature circles are: group discussion leader or director, summarizer, word master, connector, culture collector and passage person.

It is important to mention that this type of literature circles has been adopted by the researcher in implementing the experiment of this study.

4- Non- fiction literature circles.

Nonfiction books or texts usually have a slightly different format than fiction books. Therefore, literature circles are little different when reading nonfiction texts or books in that the students read together every day, discuss new words or vocabulary terms and explain the new facts they have learned.

5- Structured literature circles.

They are very structured groups of students who meet once a week with their teacher in small group. Other students work in independent way to prepare for their group when they don't meet with the teacher. The teacher usually introduces the book on the first week then the students generally meet and start discussing the book for the following three weeks.

3- Reading Comprehension Skills.

Reading is really a complex process that can be drawn onto many different skills and these skills as Ur (1996) states, lead to reading comprehension which is the ultimate aim of reading. Celece -Murcia (2001: p 151) also points out the difficulty of teaching this skill saying that "teaching reading skills to non -native speakers of English involves unique problems and challenges at all conceivable levels of instruction "However, Rosenblatt (1978) cited in Davison et al (2011) explains that reading a book or text is a highly creative process or act .Each text supplies a blueprint that is made real by the readers as they bring themselves, their feelings, their associations and experiences to the page .Therefore, reading skills as assured by Traves (1994) can be considered as a functional activity that should be mastered at an early stages. It is also linked to a canon of text and to a literary heritage.

For Klinger (2007), reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning by the coordination of a number of complicated processes that contain word reading, word and knowledge world and fluency. Meanwhile, Harris and Sipay (1987) regard reading comprehension as the interaction between the knowledge of language symbol and students' reading skills, experiences and cognitive skills. Based on the previous definitions, it can be concluded that reading comprehension is the process of understanding the content of the written text by the activation of the reader's prior knowledge.

It is worth mentioning that the main reading comprehension skills that can be taught and applied to all the reading situations skills are presented by Calderon and Row (2004) and as follows: summarizing, sequencing, inferencing, comparing and contrasting, drawing conclusions, self – questioning, problem –solving, relating background knowledge, distinguishing between fact and opinions and lastly finding the main idea, important ideas and supporting details.

4-Methodology

4-1 Participants

To achieve the aims of this study, the researcher chose (60) second year college students, (30) students for each group from English department, college of education for humanities, university of Diyala for the academic year 2022- 2023. The researcher chose two classes randomly from the original five classes. Class A to be the experimental group and class C to be the control group. Many variables have been controlled by the researcher such as the students' age, the students 'prior knowledge and the parents' educational level of the students for obtaining better equalization of the two groups.

4-2 The Experimental Design.

To explore the effect of using the literature circles strategy on students' reading comprehension skills and motivation, a quasi-experimental design has been used and the same an observation checklist, test and a questionnaire have been conducted on the groups of the study after implementing the experiment. The traditional method of teaching short stories has been adopted for teaching the control group in which the main information, themes and summery of the assigned short story (The Dolls' House) are presented by the teacher and the students are asked to read and understand them carefully. On the other hand, the literature circles strategy is used for teaching the experimental group in which the students are trained by the researcher to follow and adopt certain steps in teaching and learning the same assigned short story.

4-3 Using the text "The Doll's House "for Literature Circles Strategy.

The Doll's House, by Katherine Mansfield (1922), a popular short story for second – year college level language students of English department, will be the basis of the several tasks and steps of implementing literature circles strategy. This short story is written in the third person through an omnipresent narrator or all-knowing narrator who has the ability to discover the feelings and thoughts of multiple character. It explores ostracization and social class through the eyes of two groups of school- aged sisters from various family circumstances.

The Dolls' House is a short story that reveals around adult economic and social prejudice and its negative effects on children. The Burnells, is a family which consists of three girls receives a gift (a doll's house). The three girls are allowed to show this gift off to their classmates except the two Kelvey sisters because they are socially inferior. Their aunt punishes the youngest Burnell child because she invited the Kelvey girls to see the doll's house.

The main themes of this short story are social hierarchy, class or status prejudice, ostracization and innocence. All these themes or topics are presented in a rather simple or straitforward manner because the basic characters are young school girls. This story reflects the influence of society on the mindsets of children and the normalization of the treatment that based on hierarchy.

4-3 Steps or Procedures of implementing Literature Circles Strategy.

The main instructional aims of conducting or implementing literature circles in the language classroom may depend on the text, short story or the context, however, the essential aim is to enable the students to analyze and comprehend the given text. Before started implementing literature circles to the experimental group, the researcher made a preview lesson. In this lesson, the students should have been exposed to the topics attached to the main themes in the selected short story. The researcher, then asks her students to share their personal experiences about the important themes in the assigned short story. This information sharing leads to the introduction of the main characters of the chosen short story.

For the purpose of introducing the notion of literature circles to the students, the researcher fosters the facilitator's role to assist in scaffolding the understanding of how the short story can be divided into smaller parts and through many simple stages of analysis and discussion will be more easily comprehended. To this aim, the students can read a short text or short story in the classroom and then make a handout to explain the main roles to be used during the unit. The researcher then demonstrates these roles and ask for five or six volunteers to make a model literature circles in front of the class as they explain the short story.

At the first meeting of the actual literature circles, the students look over the assigned book (The Doll's House) and decided the way they would divide it through the number of meetings they would have. The students also assign the main roles for their initial meeting. When all the questions have been explained and answered and the researcher makes sure that all her students understand the process, the actual lessons can begin.

It is worth mentioning that the lessons of literature circles are held twice a week and each lesson has been organized into four main sections:

- (1) **learning objectives** which imply that at the end of each lesson, the students will be able to distinguish or identify the characters and the setting of the chosen short story, use new words and vocabulary and make conclusions from the assigned story.
- (2) Introduction or **preview** is a brainstorming task which aims at enabling the students to construct image schema that assist them in understanding the setting of the short story that has been assigned or selected for the literature circles unit. Relating to this aspect, the researcher showed pictures of places like the setting of the short story to the students in order to be familiar with the settings of this story. The second aim of preview section is to help the students understand the characters and the concepts of the setting and to make conclusions. To achieve this end, the researcher worked with the students to understand the using of the following three worksheets: (A) an organizer of a character details which asks the students to design or chat each character's name, personality, physical description and qualities.
- (B) a worksheet with room to write in the place, time, culture, description, and the other facts about the setting of the selected short story.
- (C) a conclusion chart with titled lines or columns as "what I know about this "and "what I can conclude or infer ".
- (3) Do or (lesson content and tasks): When the students read the selected chapters from the assigned short story and get ready for their roles, they meet in their literature circles and work cooperatively on the worksheets for the purpose of describing the characteristics of the settings and identifying the characters. The students then, in groups add to and comment on the drawing of the setting by the illustrator s 'of the group. The students also share what they know about the behavior, actions and qualities of each character and about the main events that have happened. Finally, the students explain and discuss in details the basic plot points that are presented in the short story.
- (4) Review: One important thing to mention is that the students in the literature circles groups can be assessed according to many criteria as: the clear clarifications of the main features of the settings, the logic of conclusions or inferences that based on evidence or clues, the correct using of vocabulary and grammar points, and identifications of a literary conflicts.

At the end of this experiment, the students are expected to be able to:

- 1-Demonstrate or show their ability to compare and contrast the personalities of the characters.
- 2- Provide or supply their understanding of the setting of the story, the plot and the actions of the characters.

- 3-Apply the strategies of previewing, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing, evaluating and relating literature to their own lives.
- 4-Understand the main literary conflicts.
- 5-Define and supply many examples of vocabulary from the assigned short story and identify the main language concepts as metaphors, similes, allusions that are used in literature.
- 6-Create conversations that are based on narratives and use of the signals of transition to compare and contrast.

One important thing that need to be mentioned in implementing literature circles strategy is that the researcher must be close observer of the interactions that take place among students. These interactions are assessed both qualitatively, i. e. what type of comments were made? did these comments reflect correct reading of the assigned short story? and are there evidences of the students' thinking beyond the literal level? and quantitatively (how talk, how often).

4-4 Instruments of the study.

Two instruments were used to provide answers to the questions of the study, an observation checklist of the main reading comprehension skills which is developed by Calderon and Row (2004) was adopted by the researcher (see appendix 1-). This observation checklist scale contains ten items and each one of it measures one aspect of reading comprehension skills. Therefore, students 'reading comprehension skills have been measured by listing these skills which are being registered on three reading assignments or texts elicited from Taylor and Ballard (1967). It should be noted that the three assigned passages namely (Strange Hospitality, The Spiders 'Story and Un Usual Prision Work) are followed by variety of questions that require students 'deep understanding of these texts.

The second instrument was a questionnaire of Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) for measuring students' motivation toward reading. It's also called Motivations for Reading. This mentioned questionnaire consists of five scales that range from highly agree to highly disagree.

5- Results.

5-1 Results of the first question.

To address the first question and to verify its null hypothesis, the posttest mean and standard deviation were calculated for the two groups. Moreover, the significance of the difference was determined using the t-test of the independent samples. Table (1) shows this finding which indicates that the mean score differs significantly at (0.05) and in favor of the experimental group because the value of the t-computed (13.45) is higher than the t-tabulated (2.02).

Table -1-T-test Analysis of the two groups on the Observation Checklist of Reading Comprehension Skills

No Deviation of	nputed t alue
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Summarizing Ex=30 9.350 1.27 58	
Co=30 8.450 1.50 2	.06
Sequencing Ex=30 9.650 1.09 58 2	.09
Co=30 8.700 1.59	
Inferencing = 9.250 0.87 = 3	.30
7.950 0.85	
Comparing = 8.750 0.62 = 2	.10
and 7.900 1.56	
contrasting	
Drawing = 8.22 1.9 = 2	12
conclusions 7.99 2.04	
0.64 0.07	20
	.29
questioning 7.952 0.82	
	2.2
solving 8.547 1.48	
Relating = 8.23 1.8 =	
	.10
knowledge	
Distinguishing = 9.602 1.08 =	
between fact 8.700 1.57 2	.09
and opinion	
Finding the = 9.254 0.88 = 3	.32
main idea, 7.953 0.86	
important idea	
and	
supporting	
details	

5-2 Results of the second question

To provide an answer to the second question and to confirm its hypothesis, t- test for two independent samples has been used. The mean and the standard deviation of the students' responses on the questionnaire of motivation toward reading have been calculated by the researcher as shown in table (2). The results indicate that the computed t- value which reads19. 88 is higher than the tabulated one which is 2.01 at degree of freedom 58 and level of significance (0.05). This result demonstrates that there are differences of statistical significance and in the favor of the experimental group.

Table -2- T-test Analysis of Questionnaire of Motivation toward Reading

Group S.D Mean T-Value Level of significance

Experimental	10.167	73.800			
			calculated	Tabulated	significance
Control		124.457	19.88	2.01	
	9.436				

6- Discussion of Results.

The findings of the results of this study show that the literature significantly improves strategy students' reading circles comprehension skills as it develops their main literature skills. So, the first hypothesis of the study has been rejected. The main aspects of literature skills as discussion, students' responses and collaboration are very essential in providing a way for the students to be engaged in critical thinking and reflection. When the students learn a foreign language, collaborative discussions with peers always play a crucial role in supporting comprehension skills. This may be attributed to the fact that the active involvement that happens entails reading, listening and speaking to many different perspectives which, in turn, deepens the understanding of the students. This result can also be justified on the ground that critical reading involves the ability and the confidence of exploring the relationship between the printed value and the wider world and that through collaborative tasks and interactive discussion in the literature circles roles , the students complete conversational activities that expose them to various responses and perspectives.

In addition, applying this strategy into English language classroom can positively affects students' learning process and the development of the language in general. Among the most important benefits of implementing literature circles strategy is the development of comprehension skills which are vital when reading any text, book or short story. Many strategies as visualizing, questioning, connecting,

inferring, and analyzing can be supported through literature circles. These aforementioned strategies or skills are essential for strong comprehension and lively conversation. In this respect, this study shares the same result with Daniels and Steinekes' study (2004), Egbert's study (2007), and Ketch 's study (2005).

Furthermore, using literature circles strategy helps the students feel a sense of responsibility—and ownership. The students 'social interaction and choice easily incorporate into literature circles, which support and assist students' motivation and can have a very strong effect on their achievement. This may be justified on the ground that when the students work in cooperative groups, they support each other 's efforts and this will lead to increased motivation and attempts. This result comes in line with Chi s' study (2008) and Williams 's study (2009) in assuring that literature circles strategy support students' motivation towards reading.

7- Conclusions.

Based on the statistical findings of this study, it is evident that literature circles are a successful strategy for improving reading comprehension skills as it provides EFL learners with authentic social interactions. It can be considered as an efficient method for enhancing social, literacy and cultural skills. Literature circles strategy makes the students more familiar with reading short stories and provides them with the opportunity to use critical thinking, i. e. it helps in opening the students' appetite towards reading critically. This strategy can also reduce some of the problems that face the students through the process of reading comprehension in the English language classroom as fear and anxiety.

Literature circles strategy helps boost vital behaviors and skills including group processing and interaction. They are a strong classroom strategy in which collaborative learning is coupled with students – centered inquiry. The using of this strategy can also enhance students' reading comprehension skills by giving them the chance to look at their own short story or text more deeply using their skills of analysis in reading and understanding.

It has also been concluded that this strategy can motivate the students to get more knowledge to reach at an advanced level of reading comprehension. It has also the potential to create or provide a positive and creative climate that sustains the types of student's motivation and involvement that are vital to the development of reading comprehension.

8 - Recommendations

The teachers and instructors of English language classrooms are then recommended to use this strategy in teaching short stories, novels or any reading text as it can relieve the tedium of the traditional methods by providing a more authentic and social classroom climate.

All the students should be equipped for the requirements of a literary society as early and effectively as possible. They must be offered to access to a broad range of literary experiences that will assist in the development of critical reading.

Teachers of English language should also encourage their students to be adventures in their reading of short stories, novels and any type of reading texts. They have also to work on giving enough time for their students to practice reading skills independently.

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استراتيجية الدوائر الادبية لدعم مهارات الاستيعاب القرائي لطلبة الجامعة ودافعيتهم نحو القراءة

الملخص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى استكشاف إثر استخدام استراتيجية الدوائر الادبية في دعم مهارات الاستيعاب القرائي والدافعية نحو القراءة لطلبة الجامعة دارسي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية. أن استراتيجية الدوائر الأدبية هي عبارة عن نشاط يلتقى فيه الطلبة لمناقشة نص او كتاب او قصة قصيرة بعد قراءتها معا. هذا البحث هو تجرببي حيث تم اختيار ثلاثون طالبا جامعيا في المجموعة التجرببية والتبي درست القصبة الانكليزية القصيرة (بيت الدمية) باستخدام استراتيجية البدوائر الادبية بينما درست المجموعة الضابطة المكونة ايضا من ثلاثون طالبا نفس القصة القصيرة ولكن باستخدام الطريقة التقليدية. ولتحقيق اهداف الدراسة والحصول على البيانات الضرورية استخدمت الباحثة قائمة المراقبة او الملاحظة لمهارات الاستيعاب القرائبي وتبنت استبانة الدافعية نحو القراءة. كشفت النتائج بان اداء طلبة المجموعة التجربية التي درست القصة القصيرة باستخدام استراتيجية الدوائر الادبية كان أفضل بكثير من طلبة المجموعة الضابطة. تم تقديم تطبيقات او مضامين تربوبة لأساتذة اللغة الانكليزبة في الجامعة من اجل تعزيز او تحسين تعلم اللغة لطلبتهم وذلك عن طريق دمج استراتيجية الدوائر الادبية في صفوف تعلم اللغة الانكليزية وخاصة في تدريس القصص القصيرة والروايات من اجل اسناد او دعم مهارات الاستيعاب القرائي للطلبة ودافعيتهم نحو القراءة.