LITERATURE CIRCLES: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF FLUENCY AND FUN

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ABSTRACT
Literature circles create an opportunity for students to make reading a fun-filled activity and at the same time develop their fluency skills. This action research examined the efficacy of creating literature circles in the classroom as an intervention program to address students’ problems in reading fluency specifically in terms of phrasing and accuracy. Furthermore, it also investigated the attitudes of students’ toward reading before and after they became members of a literature circle. The study was conducted among 30 grade 7 students from the same section who belong to the frustration level during the oral reading assessment done at the beginning of the school year. Results of the study revealed that there was an improvement in the students phrasing in reading after the 10-week intervention period but not significantly enough to improve their fluency. On the other hand, a significant difference was observed on the students’ reading rate after the intervention period. Furthermore, the students’ attitudes toward reading have also positively changed after they became members of the literature circles. The study concluded that the creation of literature circles in the classroom could improve students’ reading fluency.

Keywords: literature circles, fluency, phrasing, rate, discussion director, summarizer, reader, vocabulary enhancer

INTRODUCTION
Reading fluency is one of the many skills that young learners of English must develop for them to become independent readers. Fluency refers to one’s ability to read a word accurately and quickly. It is predominantly important to one’s reading ability for it links the gap between word recognition and comprehension. Thus, when fluency is not mastered other skills in reading such as comprehension will also be impossible to master.

A reader who has not developed fluency reads words chopply and slowly- taking longer time to recognize a word and leaving little attention to understand the meaning of the text. A fluent reader, on the other hand, is characterized as someone who reads words loudly and with ease in a short period of time. In other words, fluent readers can recognize and comprehend words at the same time.

The declining numbers of fluent readers even among secondary level students have alarmed educators and researchers. According to Kozol (2012) if the downward trend continues for a long time without the appropriate intervention, it would be that in the coming years schools will not be able to produce independent and proficient readers.

In the local scenario, specifically at Tongantongan National High School, reading fluency is also a problem which is not mastered by majority of grade 7 students. As the researcher observed during her years of teaching English among grade 7 learners, accuracy, phrasing, and rate are the major reasons that hinder learners from comprehending even just a short text. Frustration readers find these components of fluency very difficult to master. In fact, results of the students’ oral reading in the placement exam during enrolment revealed that majority of them were not able to read 100-120 correct words in a minute which is the standard CWPM for their level according to
Collaborative learning is an educational theory championed by Vygotsky who posits the importance of a joint intellectual effort in achieving a goal (Denning & Dunham, 2010). It is based on the idea that learning is naturally a social task. Usually, students are working in groups of two or more, mutually searching for understanding, solutions, or meanings, or creating a product. The use of collaborative learning inside the classrooms has been used by teachers for several years seeing its benefits especially among young learners who need scaffolding from other people. Benefits of this approach include; learning to work cooperatively and support each other, engaging in meaningful conversations with peers, and fostering individual accountability to the team among many others.

On the other hand, independent reading is an approach that allows learners to practice the strategies they have learned during guided reading. With level appropriate materials, students now have the skills they need to read on their own. That means they can read confidently and will be excited about their ability to read. Students are much more likely to view reading as a priority when they have some ownership in the reading process.

**Statement of the Problem**

This study sought to determine the effects of using literature circles to improve students’ reading fluency. Specifically, it attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in the students’ reading fluency in terms of?
   a. phrasing
   b. rate, before and after the creation of literature circles in the classroom?
2. What are the students’ attitudes toward reading before and after the creation of literature circles in the classroom?

**METHODOLOGY**

Participants of this study include 30 grade 7 students from Tongantongan National High School who belong to the frustration level in the oral reading test done during the enrolment period to place the students in their respective sections. This study employed purposive sampling for the participants were purposely chosen as they fit the purpose of the research. The participants who came from the same section include 19 males and 11 females.

The researcher was able to conduct the study for three times a week (Mondays-Wednesdays) for a period of 10 weeks. Furthermore, the researcher observed only the students’ reading fluency in terms of phrasing and rate before and after the intervention, and their attitude towards reading before and after becoming a member of the literature circles.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Students’ phrasing

|                        | N | Mean | Sig (2-tailed) |
|------------------------|---|------|----------------|
| Pre-Evaluation-Post Evaluation | 30 | 2    | .036           |

**Significant at p < 0.05 level

Table 1 shows that after a ten-week period of intervention there is no significant difference in the students’ phrasing before and after the use of literature circles. Phrasing, as a component of reading fluency, refers to the reader’s ability to properly observe pauses and stops due to correct observation of punctuation marks. It is a skill that readers must develop in order to comprehend the correct meaning of a reading text, which may mean differently when one do not know when to pause or stop. Furthermore, when students read in a word for word manner, they might also compromise the meaning of the text. A good example of this are the use of prepositions such as of and if and noun markers such as an and the. When read in isolation, these words have limited meanings. However, it must be noted that the purpose of these words is to enhance the meaning of other words in a phrase or sentence. Thus, phrases such as; in the table, on the table, by the table, and in a table may distort the reader’s perception of the intended meaning of the text if the reader reads it word by word and not by phrases. As Seitz (2010) explained, “good readers make meaning by reading phrases while struggling readers limit meaning by reading word by word.”

This has been the problem observed by the researcher among the respondents. They seem to read the text in a word for word manner, disregarding commas and periods. Thus, proper phrasing was introduced to them by the researcher. In addition, the researcher made sure that when she read the text at the beginning of every reading session, proper phrasing was really observed so students would emulate her.

Phrasing is really a very important component of fluency that one must master. However, it cannot be mastered over a short period of time. Thus, it is understandable that between phrasing and rate, students would find phrasing more difficult to master given the short period of time. A 15-minute reading in the literature circles, three times a week for a period of 10 weeks is not enough to develop a habit or a skill as difficult as phrasing. However, it can also be noted that some of the students’ scores in the multidimensional scale have improved a little after the intervention period. Some of them were able to read a mixture of run-ons, sometimes pauses for breath, and with only a little bit of chopiness as compared to their monotonous voice and no respect for commas and periods at the beginning of the study.

The researcher further observed that those students who read with a very low, somewhat murmuring voice at the start of the intervention period have improved after 10 weeks. Some of them began to sing-sung the parts of the reading text even during their vacant time. It is a good indication that they have slowly applied the conventions of phrasing, especially in literature, even when they are doing it unconsciously. There are also times that the students tried to imitate the researcher’s style in reading especially with prosodic text. It is also an indication that somehow the researcher’s modelling style (reading the text aloud to the whole class at the beginning of the session) has reached and affected the learners in a good way.

By listening to good models of fluent reading, students learn how a reader’s voice can help written text make sense. They become aware that there has really to be proper phrasing when reading. That is the reason why in choosing the reading material for the pre and post evaluation, the researcher made sure to vary them. Two were in the forms of poetry while the other one is a short story. Poems are very good materials in developing fluency because of its rhythmic pattern.

According to Jacobs (2015) it is very important for teachers to model proper phrasing when reading aloud. By showing the students how to read effortlessly and with expression, the teacher is modelling how a fluent reader should sound. Also, it encourages those who are shy that one should not feel ashamed or awkward in using the correct phrasing, including volume and intonation in reading.

Table 2. Students’ reading rate

| Rate       | N | Mean | Sig (2-tailed) |
|------------|---|------|----------------|
| Pre-Evaluation-Post Evaluation | 30 | 65   | .002           |
| Post Evaluation | 30 | 78   |                |

**Significant at p < 0.05 level
Contrary to the result of the students’ phrasing, Table 2 shows that there is a significant difference in the students’ rate in reading before and after the intervention period. Thus, the second null hypothesis (H02) should be rejected. As explained at the beginning of this study, the students’ rate in reading were computed by getting the number of correct words read in a minute divided by the total number of words read, which included the correct and incorrect, multiplied to 100. After the intervention period of 10 weeks, results showed that the students’ rate in reading have increased significantly. Still, if the researcher would identify their fluency levels (which is not actually included in this study) based on Hasbrouck & Tindal’s Oral Fluency Chart, 16 would belong to the frustration level, 7 in the instructional level, and 7 in the independent level. It only means that although their reading rates have improved considerably after the 10-week intervention period, yet it was not enough for them to qualify to the next level. However, the students’ overall fluency level is beyond the parameters of this study. Based on the objectives of the present study, the researcher only focused on the significant difference of the students’ rate before and after the intervention and not their fluency levels knowing that given the limited period of the study and the exceptionally high standard of Hasbrouck & Tindal’s Fluency Chart it would be impossible for the students to develop fluency as a skill.

The concept of automaticity is a skill aimed by reading rate. Rate is quite simply correct words read per minute. Learners are successful with decoding when the process used to identify words is fast and nearly effortless or automatic. To recognize words rapidly with little attention required to the word’s appearance is a major component of fluency. Accordingly, some learners have developed word pronunciation skills but read slowly.

In the case of the respondents in Tongantong National High School, most of them have difficulty in pronunciation, recognition, and thus also affects their rate in reading. In their effort to read fast, others do word guessing, skipping, and or stuttering once they encounter new or difficult words. This becomes a challenge and a frustration on the side of the researcher to hear the students who are mostly around 12-14 years old and still have these problems in reading. Thus, she made sure that the creation of literature circles would help these readers who belong to the frustration levels.

During the intervention period, the researcher would always start their reading time by reading the text aloud to the whole class. Then they will be left on their own circle to do their specific responsibilities. Although, the researcher would like to observe each student’s performance with the group, as much as possible she refrained from doing it obviously, such as sitting with the group, so they can independently work on their own and that their discussions would be authentic. Every Thursday, the researcher collected the student’s notebook to ensure that all of them have done their part in the circle and she was glad to notice that indeed they were doing their specific task. Also, the researcher was able to track the student’s progress when it comes to their reading rate because it was all recorded in their notebook. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise that there was a significant difference on their reading rate after a 10-week period of intervention.

According to Engelman (2012), it is very important that students know their progress because they would surely respond positively to realistic data. Meaning, if they receive good evidence that they are doing well, and meeting reasonable expectations, they will keep trying and persist when they regress or when they read materials which has become a little more difficult.

The researcher found Engelman’s advice to be true in the case of the respondents of this study. Most of them were proud to report to their teacher that the number of words they have read per minute has increased as their reading session’s progress. The researcher also made sure that other external motivations such as praises and recognitions in the class were given to those whose performances have improved.

Lastly, the researcher observed that when students’ record their reading rate and found that there was only a minimal improvement some of them approached her and ask if they could do it one more time so they could have a much lower time in reading a certain selection. It only showed how motivated they are in improving their reading rate. When there is still enough time, the researcher allowed them to reread and reread the selection so they could improve their time provided that other members of the circle have already read the same material. By doing this, they could improve their rate without jeopardizing proper pauses, stops, and correct pronunciations.

### Table 3. Students’ attitudes toward reading

| Statements                                              | Prior to Intervention | After the Intervention |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
|                                                         | Mean  | Descriptive Rating | Mean  | Descriptive Rating |
| 1. I enjoy my reading lessons.                         | 1.1   | Not Sure            | 2.7   | Agree              |
| 2. Reading is interesting                              | 1.7   | Not Sure            | 2.3   | Agree              |
| 3. I like to read in front of people.                  | 0.7   | Disagree            | 2.2   | Agree              |
| 4. I learn a lot when I read.                          | 2.3   | Agree               | 2.8   | Agree              |
| 5. Reading is my best subject in school.               | 0.6   | Disagree            | 2.2   | Agree              |
| 6. It is easy for me to answer questions about stories I read. | 0.9   | Disagree            | 2.0   | Not Sure            |
Table 3 shows the mean and the descriptive rating of the students’ answers in a survey question regarding their attitude towards reading. Most of their answers showed a negative attitude against reading before the reading intervention was done in the classroom. More than half of the respondents answered not sure in the statement, “reading is interesting,” while 10 agreed and only 3 disagreed. It could be an indicator that students’ prior experiences in reading have not instilled in them a love for reading. One factor which could have attributed to this is the kind of materials they have read.

According to Bedee (2010), choosing the appropriate reading material may play a significant role in arousing a reader’s interest. Most of the time this differs between gender. Boys typically prefer to read comics, action and adventure, sports, science fiction, and joke books, while girls prefer fairy tales, romantic novels, picture books, and fashion magazines, which are often not found in small school libraries much more in a classroom reading corner. To support students in their reading development, teachers are therefore advised to create a book-rich environment where readers have opportunities for choice and social discussion. This is what literature circles is all about.

By creating literature circles in the classroom, the researcher hopes that students’ interest in different reading materials will be aroused and thus find the activity an interesting one, something that they would look forward to everyday. The researcher found this to be true when she saw one student brought to school a small fairy tale book and told her that she would donate it in the reading corner so her classmates could also read it. The girl then described the story in detail to her classmates, most of whom have no reading materials at home. Every now and then, one or two students open that book and read it in the reading corner of the classroom.

In another statement, “I learn a lot when I read”, it was surprising to note that almost all of them agreed to it. It is a positive sign that although most of them find reading not so much of an interesting activity, yet they know that it is very important to one’s learning. Their acknowledgement that reading is necessary to augment their knowledge makes the researcher hopeful that their attitude towards reading could still be changed to a more positive note. Their agreement with the statement will encourage them to respond aesthetically as well as efferently to any reading materials and therefore produce an even stronger motivation to read.

Another important point to note on the students’ attitude survey was their answers to statements 9, 11, and 14 which all focus on having someone to read with. Before and after the intervention period, majority of them were in favour of having someone read and pronounce words to them properly and read together with peers and classmates. This indicates that students prefer collaborative tasks than individual activities. They find reading to be more fun when done together with peers. The finding supports Krashen’s (1982) input hypothesis which explain that learners, especially young ones, learn best when they are exposed to comprehensible input. When students listen to teacher’s modelling them the correct way of reading, when peers help them pronounce words properly in the literature circles, and when another peer encourages them to continue reading these and many others are considered input to a learner’s already existing knowledge in reading.

Furthermore, Mills & Jennings (2011) also posits that the use of literature circles as a model for cooperative learning offers an opportunity for readers to make connections of the reading text and their schema. Regardless of cultural differences, it is important for students to feel connected to their school by
having positive interactions with peers. In furtherance, Tracey and Morrow (2012) explained that as students participate, they learn from other group members by talking about the text they have read and make different connections. Most importantly, literature circles allow students to make choices and demonstrate initiative in response to their learning. Choice typically leads to increased engagement and motivation to read more and more until it becomes a natural habit.

Lastly, the survey also depicts students’ self-assessment of their reading abilities. In statements 8 and 12 (I think I can read more than 70 words per minute and I think I am a good reader) majority of them answered “not sure” to the first statement and “disagree” to the latter before the intervention period. However, after the 10-week intervention period, when they were asked to answer the same survey questionnaire, majority of them agreed to both statements. Students’ answers indicate that their self-confidence, when it comes to reading, had also improved. It can be attributed to the group’s daily monitoring of their rating record when reading. Since students are instructed to log each member’s time in reading, they were able to monitor their progress and felt more confident in doing it. They viewed themselves as better readers than before knowing that they have already made a milestone in their reading progress chart.

Indeed, the creation of literature circles in the classroom has helped readers looked at reading in a newer and much better perspective. One observation made by the researcher was that of a few learners who repeatedly became so engrossed in the reading activity that they tried to read in advance the stories in the next pages. The researcher had to remind them to be careful not to continue further to the next pages until the rest of the group had a chance to read the story for that week. Nevertheless, it delighted the researcher to see this kind of reaction from members of the literature circles.

SUMMARY

The study investigated the effects of creating literature circles in the classroom to students’ reading fluency in terms of phrasing and rate. Furthermore, it also determined the students’ attitude towards reading before and after the students became members of literature circles in the classroom.

Using Rasinski’s multi-dimensional scale, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative data in analysing the significant difference of the students’ scores in phrasing before and after the use of literature circles in the classroom. It also investigated the significant difference of the students’ scores in reading rate before and after the intervention period.

The study revealed that there was no significant difference in the students’ phrasing before and after the intervention period. There may be a chance on the students’ scores after they engaged in a 10-week reading program as members of the literature circles, but it was not significant enough to affect the total result of the study. Thus, the first null hypothesis of the study which states that, “There is no significant difference in the students’ fluency in terms of phrasing before and after the use of literature circles,” was accepted.

The study also presented the students’ reading rate and found that there was a significant difference of 0.002 before and after the intervention period. The students’ reading rates have significantly improved after they become members of the literature circles in the classroom. Therefore, the second null hypothesis of this study which states that, “There is no significant difference in the students’ reading fluency in terms of rate before and after the use of literature circles in the classroom,” was rejected.

Lastly, this study revealed that before the intervention period the general mean of the students’ scores in their reading attitude was 1 which showed a negative attitude towards reading. However, after the intervention period, their overall mean became 2.2 which reflected a positive attitude towards reading. Results of the survey showed that the creation of literature circles in the classroom have positively changed students’ attitude towards reading.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn: First, there is a change in the students’ scores in phrasing after the intervention period, but it was not big enough to be considered significant in this study. Second, there is a significant improvement in the students’ rate after the creation of literature circles in the classroom. Third, there is a positive change on the students’ attitudes toward reading after they became members of the literature circles in the classroom. Lastly, it should be noted that these conclusions were drawn on the bases of the parameters set on this study. Certain limitations such as time constraints and proximity may have indirectly affected the conclusions. In the same way, other factors and areas which were not investigated may also have affected the students’ total fluency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations were formulated: First, it is suggested that teachers, especially those who are handling lower level classes, conduct a reading assessment in their classes at the opening of the school year to identify the students’ reading levels. This would help them in planning for lessons and activities which would address the students’ needs. Second, it is recommended that English teachers outline lessons that have several activities that allow learners to read and explore different types of reading text no matter how short it is. By doing these, learners will have an opportunity to choose the genre that interests them best. Third, it is suggested that diverse reading materials appropriate for the learners’ levels should be available in the classroom reading corner. Reading corners should not only be created for the room structuring and observations but instead it should serve its purpose of enticing students to sit down and grab a material of their interest. Thus, it must be a book-rich area. Fourth, it is encouraged that teachers try and explore the use of literature
circles in the classroom especially during reading time. Other roles which were not mentioned in this study could also be assigned to the students depending on the skill the teacher aims to develop. Lastly, it is recommended that further studies of bigger scope and longer time with the use of other variables (not included in this study) could be done to validate further and enhance the results of the present study.

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