

Conference Paper

Maximizing Students' Critical Reading through Virtual Literature Circle Strategy: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

With the advancement of the 21st century, Indonesia, like other countries, is also facing challenges in education, particularly for the primary and secondary school students. Undoubtedly, literacy is one of the crucial skills in the 21st-century education, which encompasses critical thinking and critical reading skills. In an effort to maximize students' critical reading skills, the researchers conducted virtual conferences and workshop for the teachers of English in primary and secondary schools on the practice of Literature Circle Strategy (LCS) to maximize students' skill in critical reading. In total, 25 teachers from Malang City and 183 teachers from the Kediri area were included in the study. In Kediri, a one-day conference was held that focussed on the concepts and rules of practicing the LCS in online classes. In Malang, a virtual conference was held on the first day followed by a workshop on the second. While the first day was spent on explaining the LCS to the participants, on the second day, they practiced the strategy, in offline sessions. At the end of the workshop, the participants shared their perceptions on this strategy by filling in a questionnaire, stating what they thought would be the process of practicing this strategy both in online and face-to-face classes. This study therefore reports the results of the analysis on their perceptions.

Keywords: EFL teachers, perceptions, LCS, virtual

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1. Rationale

The emergence and advancement of technology and information since the beginning of the millennium era has brought about great changes in all parts of life. One of the aspects of life most greatly impacted by the changes and advancements is education. It is also considered as the most powerful weapon to improve the quality of life, both spiritually and physically. Indonesia, through the decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture, in collaboration with the Board of National Standards of Education, has launched a modified curriculum to face this new era and the 21st Century, called the Curriculum 2013. It aims to prepare young generation to become more spiritually, socially, knowledgably

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and skilfully competent in leading and managing the country in 2045, a period of a hundred year in independence (Indonesia Curriculum Document, 2013).

As is known, the 21st Century education basically covers the 4 Cs: Communication, Critical thinking, Collaboration, and Creativity. In fact, Indonesian students' competence in facing the 21st Century is still far from satisfactory; their scores in international, standardized tests have not shown good results so far. Evidence from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests clearly shows this fact; in 2009 Indonesian lower secondary school students ranked 57 out of 65 countries joining the prestigious competition, obtaining 396 (compared to OECD scoring 493), and in 2013 achieved the same score while OECD increased, 496 (Indonesia Curriculum Document, 2013). The latest results (2018) have not shown considerable improvements either. In all three subjects (Reading, Mathematics, and Science), Indonesian students rank no 6 from the bottom.

In the local scope, as was revealed in Sugihartati's findings, most primary school students in Surabaya City (East Java) have rarely paid a visit to the city main library to read, indicating that young learners are not literately interested in reading yet. This is in line with the international viewpoint that Indonesian young people's literacy is categorized low (Sugihartati, 2016).

Other empirical evidence displayed that there was a positively significant correlation between reading interest and reading habit & reading competence (Sugihartati, 2016). Thus, low reading interest might result in low reading competence. These were also highlighted by a study conducted by Cambridge Centre *Universitas Negeri Malang* (2015) revealing that the students joining the international standard reading test (Checkpoint) reached level 4 out of the maximum level 6. All in all, the Indonesian youth' reading skills are still far from being satisfactory, so an immediate action should be taken.

Since 2016 the Indonesian government has started off a program, the so-called 'School Literacy Movement' (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah*) with three-phase action, namely, Phase 1, where students are firstly introduced to reading habit, refers to Reading for Habit Formation in which students are trained to read a non-subject matter reading material in 15 minutes prior to class session daily. After reading has become a habit, schools are to conduct Phase 2 with Developmental Reading where they are encouraged to make a brief summary of what they have already read. Phase 3 is the Subject- Matter-Based Reading in which students are triggered to read more subject-matter based reading materials (*Gerakan Literasi Sekolah*, 2016).

In order to realize the government literacy policy, there should be efforts to support this movement to stimulate young learners to read. One of the most important aspects of

literacy is not the habit and skill of reading itself, but the ability to read critically. There are a number of ways to train student to be critical thinkers while they are reading, and one of those ways is 'Literature Circle Strategy (LCS)', a reading strategy which has been long implemented in developed countries as American and European schools as early as primary level to raise literacy. In 1993 school children, especially immigrants, in Chicago, America accomplished low reading competence and the government took immediate action via LCS in that the children are trained to get used to reading by analysing and evaluating reading materials with peers either with or without tutors' monitor. The readers are not only required to find out or remember facts but also practice high order thinking skills like making inferences/conclusions, hypothesizing, making judgements of what they have read (Daniels, 2002). Further Long and Gove (2003) postulated that through literature circle strategy students were more engaged in interpreting a story from different points of view via in-depth peer discussion.

LCS is a suitable strategy to be used with young learners, considering the facts that according to Piaget (as quoted by Cameron, 2001) and Pinter (2012), there are several reasons as follows: (1) children at the age of 7 up to 11 years old have accomplished 'performing operation' meaning that they are able to carry out such tasks as combining, separating, composing, folding and multiplying; (2) they learn how to practice high order thinking like deductive/inductive thinking, analysing, and synthesizing; (3) they are able to think abstractly and reflectively; and (4) they can solve problems. These are supported by Kohlberg (as quoted by Clark, 1984) postulating that (1) the children 's development of cognitive reasoning at this age is focussed on cognitive reasoning enabling them to think critically; and (2) therefore, they start learning their surroundings, and differentiating fiction and non-fiction world.

Due to the low level of literacy of Indonesian lower secondary school students, it is indispensable to train literacy competence earlier, therefore, this study is then conducted to experiment LCS to promote young learners' critical reading in order to empower their high order thinking skills like inferring, formulating hypothesis, making judgements and writing a summary. This was empirically verified by Klinger, Vaughn and Schumm (1998) disclosing that through their experiment the subjects in the experiment group achieved higher score in peer discussion compared to those of the control group, but the two groups reached the same competence in comprehending the content course of Social Studies (Daniels, 2002). Further, Marshall (2006) found out that (1) LCS resulted in promoting critical reading skills for high achievers, and (2) was worth for those with high reading interest.

Looking at the research findings cited above, we then decided to conduct a webinar+workshop on implementing LCS to maximize students' critical reading skills. In the condition of the COVID-19 pandemic, the webinar (virtual conference) was conducted online, while the workshop was done in offline mode, with limited number of participants, adhering to the safety protocols. There were two virtual conferences conducted, one in Kediri, with 183 participants, and one in Malang, with 25 participants. They are teachers of English at the Primary and Secondary schools, with varying lengths of teaching experiences.

The webinars explained the concepts of LCS, its relations with Critical thinking and critical reading, and the steps of how to implement it. It also explained how LCS can be conducted with online platforms, using break out rooms with Zoom. The offline workshop, which was done in Malang with 12 participants, provided models/simulations of the LCS in class, and the participants were given the chance to be students, as well as teachers.

2. EFL Teachers' Perceptions on the Non-Virtual Implementation of LCS

In EFL context, teachers have not been familiar with LCS, therefore, the presenters explained the principles of LCS, as follows. LCS is a group activity, in which each group consists of 4 people, each with a certain role: vocabulary finder, question asker, story mapper, and summarizer. After the virtual conference and non-virtual practice of LCS, the teacher participants were requested to fill in a questionnaire on the probable implementation in their classroom. Based on the results of analysis, it was revealed that: 1) all or almost all participants (95% to 100%) feel that this strategy is very useful in helping students understand the texts more easily, in understanding vocabulary in the texts, in understanding the sequence of events, the cause-effect relationship, drawing conclusions, and evaluating the texts; 2) the majority of participants (95%) feel that this strategy can enhance the students' critical thinking skills, and 3) the majority of participants (80%) feel that this strategy can be used with most text types, not only narratives/stories.

3. The Power of Virtual Learning Through Zoom Breakout Rooms

It goes without saying that the pandemic in any countries has overhauled any facets of life, not to mention the domain of education. Students are compelled to stay home avoiding the highly contagious disease. The natural phenomenon of the 21st century in reverse has driven people engaged in education to ponder over solutions of how to keep on studying in a healthy state, and one of the very many ways is through the employment of technology—using a platform as a base upon which other applications, processes or technologies are developed (<https://www.techopedia.com>., retrieved on August 2020).

One of the easy-to-use platforms popularly utilized now is zoom which is a web-based video conferencing tool with a local, desktop client and a mobile app allowing users to meet online, with or with no video, handled by a host and co-hosts. The zoom users can gain several facilities such as choosing to record sessions, collaborating on projects, and sharing or annotating on one another's screens. For the purpose of collaborating on the projects, they can make use of breakout rooms which allow them to split the meeting in up to 50 separate sessions, depending on the program initially planned. The meeting host can split the participants into separate sessions automatically or manually, and switch between sessions at any time (<https://sitelicense.ucr.edu>, retrieved on August 2020).

In implementing the Literature Circle Strategy with role cards, this sort of zoom platform might work for training the competence of critical reading online. As the LCS that we introduce has four roles, the rooms in the zoom breakout should also consist of four people per room, while the number of rooms can be decided by the teacher, depending on the number of students. Below is the brief explanation on how to create the breakout rooms to do the LCS.

First of all, the teacher should explain the roles of the LCS to the students, then he/she should set the zoom, to allow break out rooms to be created. Then, after the rooms have been created, the teacher can assign the participants (students) manually. Each student must be clear about the role that he/she is given (as vocabulary finder, question asker, story mapper, or summarizer) before they join the group in the rooms. Then, in the groups of 4, the students read the text that is given, and play the roles that each has been given. The teacher should set the time limit for the group work. Afterwards, the students will leave the rooms, reconvene into the big group, and report what each group has done.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

Based on the virtual conferences and the feedback from the participants regarding the offline workshop, as well as the results of the questionnaire, we can conclude that LCS is very favourable among teachers; it can maximize students' critical thinking and critical reading skills, and it helps in understanding texts, besides providing exciting activities in the class. Furthermore, as we have explained, this strategy can also be done in an online platform, which fits the pandemic situation.

For teachers of English, especially the primary up to secondary levels, it is recommended that this strategy be used frequently, to enhance and maximize students' critical thinking, which is the demand of the 21st Century education.

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