

# **Exploring a Fifth-Grade English Language Learner's Literature Discussions in Class**

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## **Overview**

Using a qualitative case study approach, the researcher explored how a fifth-grade English language learner participated in literature discussions in a classroom setting, and how she perceived these interactions about reading and text in the process of learning to read. This study's data set included detailed field notes from the reading sessions in the classroom throughout a school year, transcripts of a three-tier series of interviews with the participant, and various documents including the participant's portfolios. The findings from the research study indicated that small group literature circle discussions where the group members were all considered struggling readers encouraged all group participants to participate more, while the teacher-facilitated group discussions revealed the study informant to be less participatory. The social interactions about reading and text in class helped the participant learn more vocabulary and better understand and remember the text. They also impacted her view of reading, her reading speed, her views of self as reader, and her reading process.

Researchers have found that social interactions can play a critical role in the process of learning to read (Gambrell, Mazzoni

& Almasi, 2000; Guthrie, 1996). Social interactions help each and every student, including English language learners (ELLs), to develop more complex levels of thought, language, and literacy. When learners feel they are members of a group or club, much learning occurs effortlessly, which results in a lower affective filter that leads to more language learning (Krashen, 1993). More importantly, informal groups help ELLs become familiar with discussing literature by observing and learning from their American peers during the meaning negotiation process (Peregoy & Boyle, 2009). Social interactions thus help ELLs to develop literacy skills and promote higher level thinking skills and the intrinsic desire to read and write (Gambrell, Mazzoni & Almasi, 2000). When researchers and educators attend to the concerns of ELLs, much of their attention in the past has been given to K-3 students (Robinstein-Avila, 2003; Vacca & Vacca, 1999). ELLs at the middle level (grades 4-8) face complex challenges (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) when compared to students in the primary grades of K-3. They need to comprehend a variety of texts in different content areas while still learning the language. Due to language and cultural barriers, many of them lack self-efficacy for reading tasks and learning activities, which often leads to poor academic performance at school (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002). As classrooms become more and more diverse in their cultural and linguistic make-up, it becomes increasingly important to understand techniques that will facilitate the learning of students from different cultural backgrounds, especially those who struggle with both the language and literacy.

In Literature Circles, "readers bring their 'rough draft' understandings about the book to a discussion and think collaboratively with other readers to create new and more complex

understandings... the dialogue in these circles leads to new perspectives on literature, life, and literacy" (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996, p. 480). As a part of a comprehensive and balanced literacy program, literature circles afford students rich opportunities to use many skills they learn in other areas of the program such as reading aloud, oral language, making connections, critical thinking and the like (Daniels, 2002; Hill, Schlick Noe, & King, 2003). Despite these opportunities, Day and Ainley (2008) found that many schools and teachers are skeptical about implementing literature circles with ELLs and struggling readers.

This study was to explore the social aspect of reading in literature circles (Daniels, 2002) in relation to middle level ELLs. More specifically, this study set out to investigate how a fifth-grade ELL participated in literature/reading discussions in different classroom settings, and how she perceived these interactions about reading and text in the process of learning to read. Two questions guided this study:

1. What social interactions associated with reading occur at school for a fifth-grade ELL, and how can these interactions be described?
2. How does the participant perceive the social interactions associated with reading in her classroom reading experiences?

### **Theoretical framework**

The research project was grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivist theories (1978, 1986), especially those pertaining to language and literacy development. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Specifically, this study was

based on the three principles of Vygotsky's theories and grounded in work by other researchers who have also addressed the importance of social interactions in literacy learning (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000; Wink & Putney, 2002). These principles are:

1. Human action is mediated by signs and tools—primarily psychological tools such as language. Psychological tools are first of all social since they are products of the social/ historical/cultural system and individuals access them by participating in cultural practices. At the same time, these tools are utilized in the process of social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). In a sociocultural environment, language is the predominant means by which people make sense or meaning.

2. Learning and development are social, cultural, and historical by nature. From a Vygotskian perspective, everything about learning and development is social. Development occurs first between people, then within individuals (Vygotsky, 1981).

3. Learning is facilitated through the assistance of more knowledgeable members of the community and culture in the zone of proximal development. The ZPD is a way of viewing what a child is coming to know. Children are able to solve problems beyond their actual development level if they are given guidance from someone more advanced. The person could be a more capable student, a parent, and/or a teacher (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). The more accomplished peer may not be obvious in some cases, and will not always be the same student. This notion takes into consideration individual differences and focuses on the communicative nature of learning.

## Research methodology

To answer the research questions, a qualitative case study was implemented because "qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes" (Glesne, 1999, p. 24). Case study methodology "involves systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions" (Berg, 2001, p. 225). A case study presents insights into real-life situations that "can be constructed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research" (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). The understandings gained from case studies can not only affect but also improve practice, which is one of the final goals of this study.

### Participants

"Qualitative researchers neither work (usually) with populations large enough to make random sampling meaningful, nor is their purpose to produce generalizations" (Glesne, 1999, p. 29). The participant in this study, Rosa (a pseudonym) was an ELL in an English-only fifth-grade classroom at a suburban public school. Being a Puerto Rican American she came to the U.S. two years before this study, and neither of her parents spoke English. At the beginning of this study, she had just completed the dual language program and was still struggling with reading according to her teacher's assessments. The school was using a guided reading program. Since she was reading at the third grade level at the beginning of the school year, she was put in a group together with four other struggling readers. Meanwhile she was learning to adjust to the English-only environment.

### Data sources

Data sources for this study included detailed field notes from the daily reading sessions in the classroom throughout an entire school year, transcripts of interviews with the participant, and various documents including transcripts of the participant's reading/literature discussions and the participant's literacy portfolios. Triangulation was thus assured through the large and varied volume of data sources.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was based on the naturalistic method as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). During the analysis, the researcher read and re-read the data and looked for patterns and themes across all data. The procedure the researcher followed was open coding, an unrestricted coding of the data (Strauss, 1987). This inductive process allowed for themes to emerge and for the participant's voice to be heard, thus presenting the perceptions of the participant in the most forthright manner (Berg, 2001).

## Findings

Rosa's teacher followed a guided reading framework. She had not used literature circles before this study, and believed that students in the lower-level group could not learn much by discussing what they read among themselves. As a result, the researcher was with Rosa's group when they had literature circle discussions among themselves. Over the course of the school year, Rosa participated in two learning situations: (a) teacher-facilitated guided reading small group discussion, and (b) small group discussion with and without role sheets with the same guided reading group members, while the researcher was mostly an observer and sometimes a facilitator. In situation (a), Rosa with four other students, the lowest-level students in the class according to the teacher, read and discussed several books assigned by the teacher. During the discussions, they mainly answered the teacher's comprehension questions, summarizing what they read, practicing comprehension strategies and learning new vocabulary or terms. In situation (b), in the same group they read and discussed the book selected by the teacher, *Thunder at Gettysburg* (Gauch, 2004), using role sheets first (questions, vocabulary, connection, prediction, and new learning) and then free discussions about the book later. Rosa and her group had twenty minutes for their reading sessions every day.

### Level of participation

The following table (Table 1) demonstrates how frequently Rosa took turns in the discussions. In the teacher-facilitated group discussions, Rosa had the average number of turn takings, eight per meeting. She was very attentive and always ready to answer the

teacher's questions, though she often did not get the opportunities. In the literature circle discussions with her group members, the average number of turn takings was thirty-four per meeting and Rosa had twenty-five. The results show that between these two different social-interaction situations, small group literature circle discussions where the group members were at a similar level (struggling readers) encouraged all group members including the participant to participate more, while the teacher-facilitated group discussions revealed her to be less participatory.

Table 1. *Turn-taking frequency for Rosa*

Types of interactions	Frequency of turn taking	Average	Percentage (of the same five students)
Teacher-facilitated group	8 (per meeting)	8	20%
Literature circles with peers	25 (per meeting)	34	15%

### Content and function of talk

In teacher-facilitated group discussions, all five group members including Rosa only answered the teacher's comprehension questions. The teacher raised their awareness of the comprehension strategies they learned and guided them to practice and reinforce these strategies. She also asked vocabulary questions to help students understand the texts. In this situation, Rosa agreed with the teacher, retold stories, made predictions, provided evidence from the texts, made inferences, explained her understandings of some vocabulary words, and learned background information after an attempted unsure answer. All of her talk was around the book.

None of her talk, however, elicited response or further discussion from her group members. Therefore, her talk was non-facilitative and constructive since she contributed to the meaning construction. For example:

Teacher: Yes, if you go back right, the next sentence after we found observed? [Rosa points to her paper] Historians also use secondary sources to study the past. Okay? Well, that doesn't really define it either. Oh, yes it does, I'm sorry. A historian also uses secondary sources to study the past. So it's telling you a historian is someone who studies the past. You had to rearrange that sentence a little bit.

Rosa: It also says so over there. [Points to top of teacher's copy of the reading] On the top.

In the literature circle discussions, Rosa actually led the group to an accurate retelling and deep understanding of the text. She often corrected her group members' wrong presentation of the details and retold what they read, though she did agree with them sometimes. She also made judgments about what happened in the story, provided connections, made inferences and predictions, asked questions, and provided definitions of some vocabulary words. Her talk had a variety of functions: non-facilitative, facilitative, and constructive. She created further discussions and constructed meaning together with her group members. For example:

Rosa (Hiding behind the wall): She must be scared because she didn't want to get hurt.

Jake: She can't be brave if she's hiding behind the wall.

Camille: Because she ran away from her parents.

Rosa: She didn't run away. They just left because they thought it was going to be safer far away from the Civ... the fight. So they just moved over there so they could be safe from the war...

The latter example demonstrates that she changed from simply being a group member to the group member who demonstrated better understanding than the other group members. Actually, over the school year Rosa's reading level improved from third grade to fifth grade.

*Perceptions and impact of social interactions about reading and text*

Rosa liked the social interactions in class, believing "It's a great idea because kids can learn and understand more the books. They can understand it." She admitted that the teacher-facilitated group discussions helped her learn new words, "like if you don't know a word, like you could tell the teacher, and she could tell you the meaning. Or you try to find out in a dictionary." However, between the two different types of social interactions, she preferred the literature circle discussions with her group members "because we talk a lot and with Mrs. C, we don't really talk a lot." She complained: "... sometimes I get a little annoyed, when I raise my hand and they don't kind of pick me. But when I get the answers wrong, they kind of, you know, get mad. A little bit." She felt "comfortable and really good" to discuss what they read with her group, and became confident "'cause I didn't know other people kind of didn't know words, and I kind of could help them." She claimed that the discussions also helped her understand and remember the text, and she wanted to have more discussions on their own in the future. At the same time, she expressed that she

wished they could have selected a book by themselves, and she would read more challenging books.

The literature circle discussions impacted Rosa in several aspects of her reading. She read faster since she "knew more words now." Reading to her was not difficult anymore, recognizing that "I'm like beginning to be more into books." Making predictions was her favorite strategy "because you kind of guess and then find out if your prediction was really close or if it wasn't, you can just work on it. And keep working." She was happy to hear her group members saying she was a good reader because she did not know she was a good reader before the literature circle discussions. Actually, she made colossal progress over the school year. She read at home every day, and she read to her younger brother and sister in both English and Spanish. They were using the 100 Book Challenge program and she was reading at 600 at the end of the school year. According to her teacher, her reading level changed from third grade to fifth grade. She believed she needed to know more words and read more in order to become a better reader. She liked non-fiction books and believed people read to get information.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The results of this study revealed that between the two different social-interaction situations, small group literature circle discussions where the group members were at a similar level (struggling readers) encouraged all group members including the participant to participate more, and the teacher-facilitated group discussions revealed her to be less involved. This study also uncovered a grouping issue. For instance, when Rosa made

significant progress, she could have been moved to a higher-level group. Grouping patterns should be flexible in order to meet students' diverse needs (book choice, reading levels, learning needs, and so on). In addition, this study confirmed what Day and Ainley (2008) described: many schools and teachers are skeptical about implementing literature circles with ELLs and struggling readers.

Though she had her preference of discussion situations, the participant's social interactions about reading and texts in class helped her better understand and remember the texts as evidenced by her discussions, reading journals and informal interviews. These social interactions also impacted the participant's self-efficacy for reading and learning in positive ways. They impacted the participant's view of reading (Reading was not that difficult anymore), her view of self as reader (She became more confident as a reader), her view of social interactions, and her reading process (She became a faster reader with better comprehension).

There is little documented research on middle level ELLs and the social aspect of their reading. This study adds to the body of knowledge about the middle level ELLs' language and reading learning from a sociocultural perspective. Practical significance exists in this study as well. The insights gained from this study will primarily assist classroom teachers at the middle level to better understand ELLs' participation and performances in social learning activities, the role of social interaction in their language and reading development, and their reading processes, characteristics, and needs. The study can thus assist classroom teachers to better help ELLs by providing more responsive and effective instruction. Secondarily, parents can gain some knowledge of how to better support their children.

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