

SHAKESPEAREAN LITERATURE CIRCLE: A TOOL TO DEVELOP LANGUAGE SKILLS FOR EFL/ESL LEARNERS

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Keywords: Literature Circle, EFL/ESL, Tool, Elhess and Egbert, Language Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the ways how a literature circle helps improve English Language skills. A literature circle is a student centered practice session where each student gets directly involved in the work and the teacher acts as a passive actor in the back just to control the function. In this paper, the researchers adopt the literature circle model designed and practiced by Elhess and Egbert (2015). The study is conducted on 22 BRAC Nobodhara School teachers who have received in-service training offered by the BRAC Institute of Languages, BRAC University. All the teachers having Masters Graduation in various disciplines have mixed level English language proficiency. The course objective is to develop their language proficiency to a higher level so that they can use the target language both inside the classroom and even outside. In the paper, the researchers have adopted a qualitative approach and taken texts from A Midsummer Night's Dream, a comedy written by Shakespeare between 1590 and 1597. Five individual roles, namely Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher are allotted to the members of the circle so that they can work smoothly and effectively. While discussing and helping each other in the circle, every member of the group will execute his/her assigned role and responsibility. These discussion, collaboration and scaffolding in the circle to help members create a conducive environment to accelerate language learning. The researchers, thus, believe that teaching language through Shakespearean literature circle will eventually increase learner participation in a safe environment, enhance responsibility and motivation, expand collaborative discussion, develop oral proficiency, increase scaffolding opportunities and reinforce writing skills. Still, further research is encouraged in the same area to unearth the underneath.

Citation: K.M.Wazed Kabir, Mohammad Golam Mohiuddin (2018). Shakespearean Literature Circle: A Tool To Develop Language Skills For Efl/Esl Learners. International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Scientific Research (IJAMSR) ISSN:2581-4281 Vol 1, Issue 3, May, 2018, #Art.132, pp30-40

Introduction

The literature reflects life, represents the dictionary of life and uses language in contexts for which it is almost

impossible to divorce literature, language and life from one another. Life and literature emerge together as true companions. According to Lorenzo (2014),



Long before human civilization started in this world, stories are found among the constellations, beneath the depths of the oceans, and within the woodland realm. Long before language was invented, stories were told and engraved upon stone tablets and wall carvings. Long before humans began to know how to read and write with the words that our ancestors created, literature already existed. (Para 1)

A good piece of literature is replete with information, interactions, responses and messages which are the sources of language learning and teaching. Language learning becomes much effective when it encourages developing responses and reinforcing messages. The more varied the responses are, the richer the language learning will become. Literature, thus, does not keep us confined to mechanical responses, formulaic, and discrete language teaching and learning, rather it gives us a wide exposure to practice and learn the language. Hamdoun & Hussain (2015) believe that Literature offers a wide range of language structures, which can enhance our understanding of the range of language usages. This understanding of language usages has a direct impact on the learners' ability to learn and use language not for mechanical responses, but for the expression and response of those thoughts and ideas which would have stifled in the brain in the absence of rich language resources. Literary work, in such a situation, becomes a vehicle for language learning.

Teaching and learning languages, in particular English, have been embracing various approaches, methods and techniques throughout the world and these ways of teaching and learning are being changed with the changes of time. Teaching English language through literature or literature circle has been getting popularity again throughout the whole world, though there was

controversy regarding the use of literature in language class. A literature circle, an instructional approach and activity in which members meet to discuss and respond to a book they are all reading, help English language learners improve both reading comprehension and overall language performance. Daniels (2002) discusses these types of benefits of a literature circle

...literature circles have the potential to transform power relationships in the classroom, to make kids both more responsible for and more in control of their own education, to unleash lifelong readers, and to nurture a critical, personal stance toward ideas. (P. 31)

In a peer-led literature circle, each student gets much more exposure and feels less risk than in a whole-class discussion. There is more positive peer pressure to join in when the group is small and run cooperatively by students, not by the teacher. In this paper, the researchers have adopted a literature circle model (Daniels and Steineke, 2004) where five individual roles, namely Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher will be assigned to members of the literature circle to allow the group to function productively. The researchers have selected texts from Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a tool to develop English language skills of a group of adult learners in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) /ESL (English as a Second Language) context. Whether English in Bangladesh is a foreign or a second language is still controversial. According to Hamid (2009, cited in Haque & Mohiuddin, 2014), Whether English in Bangladesh is a foreign or a second language remains debatable. However, English is increasingly penetrating the society and becoming widely popular. With the rapid advancement of science and technology, trade and commerce, education and communication and with the development of



globalization, the English language has made its domain even in a country Bangladesh where people have strong nationalistic and linguistic feelings for their nations and language. As it is observed by Haque and Mohiuddin (2014), “Even though English is a *de jure* foreign language in Bangladesh, it has turned to an *aide facto* second language here”. (P. 106)

Whatever is the status of English in Bangladesh- EFL, or ESL does not matter; but the development of English language skills for the people of Bangladesh matters. To enhance English language skills, critical thinking and analytical ability of the learners, the researchers have used a literature circle for a group of mixed ability adult learners, that is, BRAC Nobodhara School Teachers who have been receiving in-service teacher training of a sixty hour long course. In the middle of the course, the teachers as researchers have selected a very interesting text from a Shakespearean comedy keeping in mind the age, interest and level of the learners with that of the text. Thus, the rationale of the paper is justified by providing the scope for adult learners to develop their comprehension skill, language skills, analytical ability, critical thinking based on the practice of a Shakespearean literature circle.

Use of Literature Circle

A literature circle integrates the best practices of collaborative learning and student-led learning. It guides students to a deeper understanding of what they read through structured discussion and extended written and artistic response. A literature circle is a form of literary engagement that encourages learners to read with a focus and then report on and discuss what they read, determining for themselves what is significant in their reading and why. It encompasses much more than

similar approaches such as book clubs (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & Geroge, 2001) or peer-led discussion groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) (Cited in Marshall, 2006). According to Schlick Noe (2004),

In literature circles, small groups of students gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth. The discussion is guided by students' response to what they have read. You may hear talk about events and characters in the book, the author's craft, or personal experiences related to the story. Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books. Collaboration is at the heart of this approach. Students reshape and add onto their understanding as they construct meaning with other readers. (Para 3)

The following table helps us understand well what literature circles are and what they are not.

Table 1: Literature Circles- What and what not

Literature Circles are . . .	Literature Circles are not . . .
Reader response centered	Teacher and text centered
Part of a balanced literacy program	The entire reading curriculum
Groups formed by book choice	Teacher-assigned groups formed solely by ability
Structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership	Unstructured, uncontrolled "talk time" without accountability
Guided primarily by student insights and questions	Guided primarily by teacher- or curriculum-based questions
Intended as a context in which to <i>apply</i> reading and writing skills	Intended as a place to do skills work
Flexible and fluid; never look the same twice	Tied to a prescriptive "recipe"

Schlick Noe, K.L. & Johnson, N.J. (1999)



According to Daniels' (2002) definition,

“Literature circles are small, temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book...[E]ach member prepares to take specific responsibilities in the upcoming discussion, and everyone comes to the group with the notes needed to help perform that job". (P. 13)

The practice of using literature, poetry and literature circles to develop language skills is widely identified throughout the world. Chen (2014) in his paper presents evidence that literature for children can be effectively used to acquire English as a foreign language in students of all ages. Students get benefit from being challenged with language input that is slightly beyond their independent level of comprehension. This comprehensible input can be provided by listening to the reading or the telling of a story. In his paper, he argues for the use of English literature of practical applications of language acquisition and learning principles in five categories of activities—story selection, listening, shared reading, independent reading, and drama.

Violetta-Irene (2015) argues that using literature in a language classroom makes the class interactive which can obviously improve communicative competence of the learners and keep a lasting impact on their mind. Such a class can enhance the critical thinking abilities of the learners and at the same time maintain a learner centered environment. It cultivates the critical abilities of the students and encompasses every human dilemma and conflict. The three main reasons for the teaching of literature have been consistently advanced. Each embraces a particular set of learning objectives for the student. These are:

- The cultural model
- The language model
- The personal growth model

Hanauer (2001) analyzed the role of the poet reading task for foreign language learning. The study involved twenty female university students, registered in a teacher training course in Israel. None of the participants had degrees in English or Hebrew literature. The results of the study were clearly positive, categorizing the task of poetry reading as a useful technique in the foreign language classroom when working with advanced learners. As the author states, poetry-reading can facilitate the development of both linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language.

Butler (2006) provides an example of an attempt to incorporate literature into language classes in a South African context. The English course he describes, implemented in the context of the University of North West, included four components: Introduction to English Studies, Introduction to Textual Analysis, Introduction to Literary Genres and Grammar Awareness. Based on the integrated approach between language and literature elements, the course resulted to be evaluated in a highly positive way (with 86% of students in favor of the integrated approach).

Minkoff (2006) tries to justify the role of an elective literature and language course for students majoring in business management. Using Barnes's (1991) book *Talking it Over* to illustrate his approach, the author describes the structure of the lessons and offers an overall evaluation of the experiment. Surprisingly, most of the students evaluated the course as a great success in spite of the fact that business students might initially seem to have had little need to acquire literature background knowledge.



The study conducted by Lin (2006) is set in a secondary school in Singapore, where English is the second language for most of the students and language and literature are usually taught as separate subjects. The author claims for the pedagogical need to embed literature into a larger framework of language classes. Anwar and Rana (2010) provide the data of an empirical investigation conducted in the context of Pakistan with 280 university students enrolled in different English language and Literature courses. After having analyzed the students' responses to the questionnaires that had been previously administered, the authors reported that most of the students considered literature as a helpful component in language studies and as an effective source to be used in the language class.

Yeasmin and et al (2011) emphasized the effectiveness of using literature in EFL classes through a project titled "Readers' Development Program". Their paper reviews the arguments for using literature in the language classroom and shows that literary texts provide a wide scope to explore multi-dimensional use of the language. Literary pieces, especially stories are more attractive and fascinating than other teaching materials and allow group discussions and individual explorations. They offer real language use, which creates a feeling for the language in the students. Activities like role plays, group discussions and presentations reduced the level of anxiety in the students and they got involved in the language with enthusiasm and interest. It is suggested that selecting the texts properly and designing a different set of activities according to the needs of the learners can facilitate language teaching and learning.

Chen (2014) focuses on the importance of literature for children to be an effective tool to develop language skills for the learners of all ages and Hanauer (2001) analyzes the role of the poetry reading task for foreign language learning whereas this paper focuses on the text of a Shakespearean comedy to develop English language skills of adult learners. Again, Butler's (2006) efforts concentrate on the incorporation of literature into language classes in a South African context and Minkoff (2006) tries to justify the role of an elective literature and language course for students majoring in business management. But the present paper is unique and interesting in its selection of the text from a comedy of Shakespeare for the adult learners in their in-service training program. Both Anwar & Rana (2010) and Yeasmin and et al (2011) conducted their studies with university students; instead the present paper has attempted to work with the participants who have Masters Graduation in various disciplines and teaching experiences. Hence, this paper is distinctive from the others for its uniqueness.

Methodology

The research was conducted in a very natural classroom setting. The researchers adopted qualitative approach to carry out the research. They observed participant's interaction, practice and progress and had a group discussion with them after their work. The study was conducted on 22 participants who have master degrees on various disciplines with limited English language proficiency. Among the participants, twenty were females and the rest two were males. All of them are teachers at BRAC Nobodhara School and receiving in-service training on English language proficiency. They were from 28 to 40 age range. Some of them have long teaching experiences whereas some are new. The



**International Journal of
Advanced Multidisciplinary Scientific Research (IJAMSR) ISSN:2581-4281**

researchers formed four groups of five members (in each) who were assigned with the roles of Discussion Director, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Enricher. The rest two members were helping and working with two particular groups. As instruments, the researchers provided each group particularly the Illustrator with a poster paper and a pencil to draw the picture of the text. As it has been mentioned, the researchers have adopted literature circle model suggested and practised by Daniels and Steineke (2004). The Discussion Director’s task was to develop at least five questions about the text and then share these questions with the group. The Literary Luminary pinpoints important parts of the text for the group in order to stimulate thinking and elicit some interesting facts about the text. The Illustrator’s job is to draw pictures related to the reading and share the drawings with the group; the group members then speculate on the meaning of the pictures and connect them to their own ideas about the text. The Summarizer’s role is to recall what happened in the reading and prepare a summary for the group, and the Vocabulary Enricher helps the group find and discuss new or difficult words (Daniels and Steineke 2004). To accomplish the research, the researchers selected texts from page 2 to 3, Scene-2, Act -2 of Shakespeare’s comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The researchers have intentionally selected the texts keeping in mind the level and interest of the learners. As the participants are adult, adaptable and interested in romantic reading, the texts have been chosen in line with their attention. Also, the researchers deliberately selected the two versions of the same text - a. original text and b. modern text; and the participants were asked to work with the modern text so that they can comprehend and work on the text. Both the texts have shown here:

Original text	Modern text
<p>LYSANDER Fair love, you faint with wandering in the wood. And to speak troth, I have forgot our way. We’ll rest us, Hermia, if you think it good. And tarry for the comfort of the day.</p> <p>HERMIA Be it so, Lysander. Find you out a bed, For I upon this bank will rest my head.</p> <p>LYSANDER One turf shall serve as pillow for us both. One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth.</p> <p>HERMIA Nay, good Lysander. For my sake, my dear, Lie further off yet. Do not lie so near.</p> <p>LYSANDER O, take the sense, sweet, of my innocence. Love takes the meaning in love’s conference. I mean that my heart unto yours is knit So that but one heart we can make of it. Two bosoms interchainèd with an oath— So then two bosoms and a single troth. Then by your side no bed room me deny. For, lying so, Hermia, I do not lie.</p> <p>HERMIA Lysander riddles very prettily. Now much beshrew my manners and my pride If Hermia meant to say Lysander lied. But, gentle friend, for love and courtesy Lie further off in human</p>	<p>LYSANDER My love, you look like you’re about to faint from wandering in the woods for so long, and to tell you the truth, I’ve gotten us lost. We’ll take a rest, if you think it’s a good idea, and wait until daylight when things will be easier.</p> <p>HERMIA Let’s do that, Lysander. Find something to cushion you while you sleep. I’m going to rest my head on this little slope.</p> <p>LYSANDER We can both sleep together on the grass. We’ll have one heart, one bed, two bodies, and one faithful vow.</p> <p>HERMIA No, Lysander. Please, for my sake, sleep a little farther away. Don’t sleep so close to me.</p> <p>LYSANDER Oh, sweetheart, I didn’t mean anything naughty when I said that. When lovers talk to each other, their hearts should understand each other. I just meant that our hearts are joined, so we can almost think of them as one heart. Our two bodies are linked together by the promises we’ve made to each other, so there are two bodies and one faithful vow. So let me sleep next to you. If I lie <i>next</i> to you, I won’t lie <i>to</i> you—I’ll be faithful and respect you.</p> <p>HERMIA Lysander’s got a way with words. I would certainly be rude and shameful if I had implied that you were a liar. But please, darling, sleep a</p>



<p>modesty. Such separation as may well be said Becomes a virtuous bachelor and a maid. So far be distant. And, good night, sweet friend. Thy love ne'er alter till thy sweet life end!</p> <p>LYSANDER Amen, amen to that fair prayer, say I. And then end life when I end loyalty! Here is my bed. Sleep give thee all his rest!</p> <p>HERMIA With half that wish the wisher's eyes be pressed!</p> <p>HERMIA and LYSANDER sleep</p>	<p>little farther away so we can behave properly. It's only proper for a well-behaved bachelor and a well-behaved girl to be physically separated like this. Stay away for now, and good night, my sweet friend. I hope your love for me remains this strong for your entire life!</p> <p>LYSANDER Amen to that. I hope my life ends before my loyalty to you does. I'll sleep over here. Sleep well!</p> <p>HERMIA You sleep well too.</p> <p>HERMIA and LYSANDER sleep.</p>
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Source: Spark Notes, 2017

Findings

As it has been observed from the interaction and participation of the learners, using literature circles as an instructional approach in the classroom has the potential to create a positive and interactive environment for the development of the target language. From the observation, it was found that the Discussion Director scanned the text very enthusiastically to formulate five questions for the other members of the group. As soon as he threw the formulated questions to the group, the members replied very quickly and correctly. The role of the Literary Luminary was to identify vital parts of the text for the group to inspire thinking and bring out some interesting facts about the text. To make it happen, the Literary Luminary read the text very minutely in collaboration with other members. He brought in light how Lysander and Hermia argued showing love and respect to each other regarding their sleeping together on

the grass. The Illustrator drew the image of the text with full interest and enthusiasm. The following are the samples of images drawn by the Illustrators of Group A and B; as it was observed, these images added further interest in the mind and heart of the other members who could realize the text easily and interestingly and connect the picture with their understanding of the text.



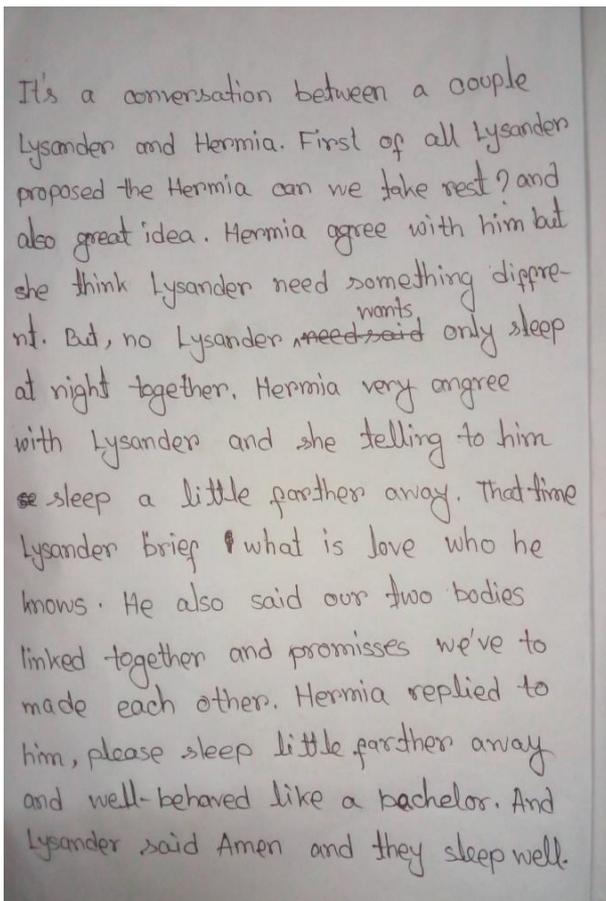
Figure-01: The picture of the selected text drawn by the Illustrator of Group –A



Figure-02: The picture of the selected text drawn by the Illustrator of Group –B

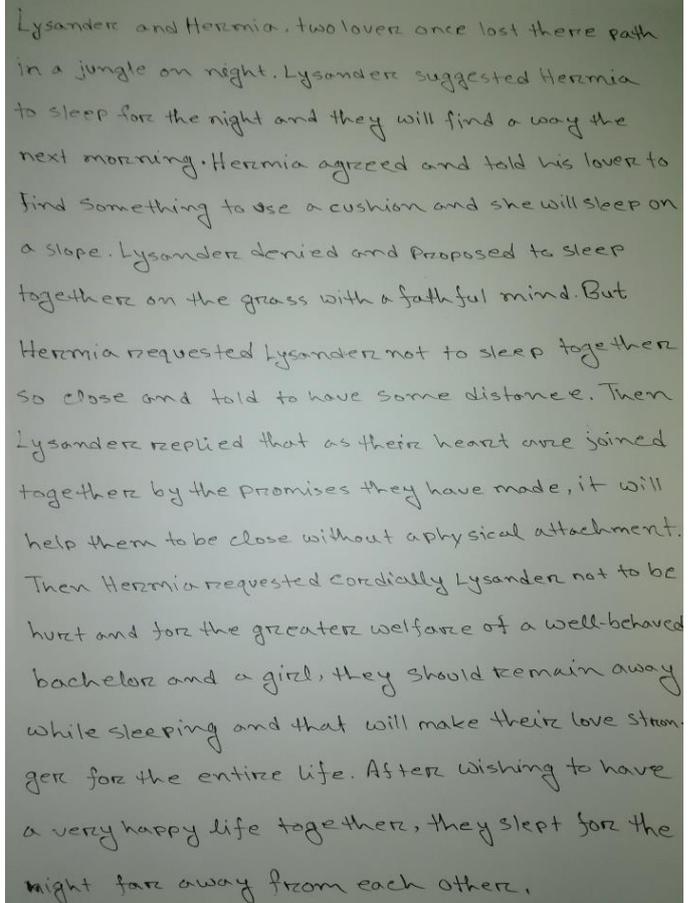
The Summarizers abridged the text based on their reading and shared this before the group members who could recap the story. The following are the summary samples written by the summarizers of Group A and C.

Summary of Group-A



It's a conversation between a couple Lysander and Hermia. First of all Lysander proposed the Hermia can we take rest? and also great idea. Hermia agree with him but she think Lysander need something different. But, no Lysander ~~need~~^{wants} only sleep at night together. Hermia very angree with Lysander and she telling to him ~~se~~ sleep a little farther away. That time Lysander brief what is love who he knows. He also said our two bodies linked together and promises we've to made each other. Hermia replied to him, please sleep little farther away and well-behaved like a bachelor. And Lysander said Amen and they sleep well.

Summary of Group-C



Lysander and Hermia, two loverz once lost there path in a jungle on night. Lysander suggested Hermia to sleep for the night and they will find a way the next morning. Hermia agreed and told his lover to find something to use a cushion and she will sleep on a slope. Lysander denied and proposed to sleep together on the grass with a faithful mind. But Hermia requested Lysander not to sleep together so close and told to have some distance. Then Lysander replied that as their heart are joined together by the promises they have made, it will help them to be close without a physical attachment. Then Hermia requested cordially Lysander not to be hurt and for the greater welfare of a well-behaved bachelor and a girl, they should remain away while sleeping and that will make their love stronger for the entire life. After wishing to have a very happy life together, they slept for the night far away from each other.

Figure-03: The samples of the summary writing by of Group A and C

The Vocabulary Enricher identified the new and difficult words and discussed them with examples. It was observed that each member of the group was working and enjoying his/her own role quite well. From the group discussion, the researchers came across interesting expression from the participants. All the participants have one expression in common that is they were very much excited with the text type and its story as because it went on according to their age and interest. Most of



the members believe that the practice provided them an opportunity to enhance all the language skills. They claimed that they read, wrote, discussed and shared their understanding of the same text in group. They further argued it was the safest zone for them to work among themselves, sometimes with help of the teacher. The members also mentioned that each member was active and responsible as everyone was assigned with a certain task which was interrelated with that of the other. Also, they debate that while doing a specific task individually in the group, they supported each other sometimes. Thus, the discussion, the image drawn by the Illustrator, and the summary written by Summarizer including the all the assigned activities of the members showed how interesting and interactive the circle was.

Discussion and Recommendation

English language teachers, practitioners and linguists are paying diverse attention and offering different tools to develop language skills for EFL/ESL learners. As a part of these efforts, the researchers adopted literature circles based on the text of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and found very interesting, informative, and inspiring results which will be mile stones for other researchers and practitioners. As each student in literature circle is assigned with a specific task, this make him/her feel a sense of ownership and responsibility. The Discussion Director's enthusiasm in scanning the text to formulate five questions gave him/her a ground to improve his/her comprehension skills. According to Daniels and Steineke (2004), literature circles support strategies such as visualizing, connecting, questioning, inferring, and analyzing that are vital to solid comprehension and lively conversation. The Discussion Directors and all the participants in this paper were adult and the selected text was regarding the eloping of Lysander and Hermia to a forest and arguing

with each other on the question sleeping together. Thus, the text went according to their level of interest resulted in the motivation and engrossment of reading, scanning and working on the text. Here, the researchers argue that in selecting text for literature circle, the teacher should consider the level of language proficiency and the age of the learners so that learners can sustain their enthusiasm and interest. Here, the researchers agree with Chen (2014) who also proposed story or text selection at the top out of five categories of activities to develop language skills through English literature. The Literary Luminary's pinpointing important parts of the text and discussing these with the members of the group to stimulate thinking and to elicit interesting facts were much more meaningful in creating opportunities to practice oral skills which ultimately helped them develop their oral proficiency. As Nagy & Townsend (2012) comments, working in literature groups provides students with opportunities for social interaction and communication about issues important to them. The Illustrators turned the words of the text into pictures, shared and shaped their comprehension and opinions on papers for which they needed to read the text well, analyze the characters and understand the environment. The researchers do believe that it is a platform for the EFL/ESL learners to develop their not only comprehension skills but also analytical ability, critical thinking by participating in literature circle as well as working as illustrators. Thus, Violetta-Irene's (2015) strong stand to use literature in a language classroom in enhancing the critical thinking abilities of the learners and maintaining a learner centered environment matched with the belief of the researchers here. Webb et al. (1998) also believe that teachers can assign engaging and challenging group activities that stimulate students' critical thinking, such as choosing a different ending to a



short story, writing a short critique, or addressing writing prompts that reflect knowledge of what they have read. Again, the summary of the text helped the members of the group to recollect what happened. In classroom practice, a teacher at the end of the session either recaps the whole class or makes students recall what happened whereas in literature circles students themselves do the same practice among themselves with the help of the summarizer. Because, the summary of the text helps learners to recall the whole event and also, ensures the development of the writing skills of the learners. So far as the role of the Vocabulary Enricher is concerned, the researchers strongly believes that he (the Vocabulary Enricher) has a great contribution in developing English language by providing definition and examples of new and difficult words. Furthermore, the learners' feelings to work in literature circle and among themselves to be the safest zone send us a great message. This message has been reinforced and strengthened with the belief of Yeasmin and et al (2011) who think that discussions and presentations among students reduce the level of anxiety in the students and they get involved into the language with enthusiasm and interest. This ensures that collaborative learning or scaffolding helps students realize that their reading challenges are solvable, and also increases their interest and involvement in the given activity. As Elhess and Egbert (2015) comment:

Through interactive discussions and collaborative tasks, learners complete conversational and written activities that expose them to diverse responses and perspectives. These experiences not only help improve their basic language and literacy skills, but may also help to develop high-order thinking skills that

are vital for helping learners to grow as independent and autonomous readers. (P.21)

Conclusion

Collaboration and peer supports in literature circles in the context of classroom practices help learners to sustain their motivation and involvement that result in the development of their communication skills and other life skills in a very conducive environment. As Elhess and Egbert (2015) state, "using literature circles as an instructional approach in the classroom has the potential to create a positive and interactive environment" (p.21). Through interactive discussions and collaboration in the circles, learners practise oral and written activities that expose them to diverse responses and perspectives. It is evident from this paper that the use of literature circles in language classroom ensures learners' motivation, engagement, and execution of the assigned responsibility. Since the assigned roles in literature circles require students to draw the events, create questions, and summarize the text, learners are called upon to use a variety of strengths and skills to prepare for the discussion which develop oral proficiency, increase scaffolding opportunities, reinforce writing skills and improve analytical ability and critical thinking. Also, the assigned responsibility makes learners feel and develop a sense of possession and accountability. Thus, a Shakespearean literary text, which goes according to the level of the learners and is used in the literature circles, is a proven kit in the development of the learners' language and life skills.

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