Students' Perceptions of Reading Circles in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Reading circles require students to engage in peer-led discussions on a chosen text. A key element of reading circles is that the learners read the text and prepare for the discussion from the point of view of an assigned role (Daniels, 2002). Reading circles can motivate students to read and participate in discussions (Elhess and Egbert, 2015) and furthermore, encourage cooperation and peer learning in the classroom (Maher, 2018). Four classes taking an English Reading & Writing Course (RW1) participated in reading circles on three occasions and provided feedback in a questionnaire administered at the end of the semester. This study explores the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing reading circles based on the feedback from 68 students, and the instructor's own observations of the procedure. Suggestions regarding the implementation of reading circles are also proposed.

Keywords: reading circles, literature circles, discussion, extensive reading

Introduction

First-year students at Rikkyo University taking the mandatory RW1 course in the spring semester are required to read extensively in their own time. Since April 2020, this course has been conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Classes of approximately 20 students are held once a week. One of the goals of the 14-week long course is to "develop reading fluency and vocabulary knowledge through reading graded readers" (English Reading & Writing Committee, 2021). Students typically demonstrate their reading by writing brief book reports or summaries, participating in class discussions or giving short presentations, with instructors having relative autonomy as to how these activities are conducted. This research explores a possible alternative method of fulfilling this part of the course through the use of reading circles.

Literature Review

Reading circles, also known as literature circles, were introduced in the United States in the 1990s in L1 literature lessons at primary and secondary schools. Based on the concept of book clubs, they were created in an attempt to engage students' interest in reading (Daniels, 2002). Daniels describes how youngsters "shared responses with their peers, listening respectfully to one another, sometimes disagreeing vehemently, but dug back into the text to settle arguments or validate different opinions" (p.1). According to Daniels' initial guidelines, students make a consensual decision about what they want to read in various groups, and each student takes notes according to a certain role to contribute to the frequent peer-led discussions with the instructor serving as a facilitator.

As the popularity of reading circles grew, the benefits of their usage in ESL classrooms were also widely investigated. Elhess and Egbert describe how the interactive nature of the discussions engages and motivates students (2015). A key element of reading circles is the students' individual assigned roles. Maher highlights the value of their use in terms of collective learning, "the collaborative nature of role-work allows the students to scaffold what they don't know, into what they

collectively learn with their peers" (2018, p.104). In addition, reading the text from the point of view of one role helps to break down various strategies needed for successful reading into manageable parts for second language learners (Furr, 2007).

Various adaptations of the roles in reading circles have been suggested over the years. However, research by Furr is considered to be influential in a Japanese university teaching context (2004, 2007). Furr clearly outlined five basic roles and prepared role sheet handouts (2007). These roles are the discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master and passage person. The discussion leader is responsible for keeping the discussion flowing and acts as a facilitator in the group. The summarizer uses their own words to give a brief summary of the plot. The connector tries to establish connections between the text and the actual world, such as between characters or events and their own lives or the environment around them. The word master chooses five words or short phrases that they feel are the most crucial to the text and explains their meaning. The passage person selects important, interesting, or puzzling passages from the text and asks the group to share opinions about them.

As reading circles were initially conceptualized for usage in L1 literature classes, discussion has also focused on selecting suitable texts for ESL lessons. Furr adapted the initial procedure suggested by Daniels with ESL reading circles in Japanese universities, proposing that the instructor rather than the students selects the text, which could be a graded reader rather than an original text, to ensure it is acceptable for students (2004). Shelton-Strong also recommends using graded readers in reading circles as they can be read easily (2012).

Design and Procedure

This section will explain the rationale behind the version of reading circles I used in this study and explain the procedure for instructors who are interested in incorporating reading circles into their own lessons. It also includes my personal reflections on the procedure. The following table shows the schedule for the implementation of reading circles.

In order to assimilate reading circles into the pre-existing course requirements, I made a number of deviations from previous research. I chose to use only four roles in the reading circles

Table 1
Class Schedule for Reading Circles

Lesson 1	Course orientation. Students took the Macmillan Readers online level test for homework and informed me of the result through a Google form. I made groups according to the levels.
Lesson 2	(1) An input session introduced the concept of reading circles, the roles and assessment procedure. PowerPoint slides were used as explanation and shared with students for their independent reference. (Please see the Appendix). (2) Following the explanation, students met their groups in Breakout Rooms on Zoom, chose a graded reader at the correct level from Macmillan readers online library and decided the roles. (3) Students read the text out of class, completed their role sheet (a Google form) and submitted it by week 5.
Lesson 5	Reading Circle 1. Students discussed the book in a reading circle in Breakout rooms on Zoom. They also decided the next book/different roles for Reading Circle 2. I acted as a facilitator and provided feedback at the end on discussions and shared good examples from Google forms.
Lesson 8	Reading Circle 2.
Lesson 12	Reading Circle 3. Students were invited to fill out a voluntary, anonymous feedback survey using Google forms at the end of the lesson.

rather than the five suggested by Furr (2007). As extensive reading is only one of many aims on the RW1 course, I needed to simplify the reading circle procedure to reduce the potential burden on students. In addition, fostering discussion skills is not an aim of this course. Therefore, I ensured that the emphasis remained on improving reading abilities. I selected the roles (discussion leader, connector, word master, and summarizer) as I felt they would be effective even if the students were reading a low-level graded reader. The explanation of the roles was based on Furr's role sheets as described in the literature review in a simplified manner (2007). They can be seen in the Appendix.

Furr recommends that all groups read the same book selected by the instructor, proposing that it makes post-reading extension activities easier to be implemented (2007). On a different type of course, I believe this would be effective. However, after consideration of the differentiation in students' reading ability levels and limitations on the online availability of graded readers, I opted for each group to select a reader by themselves according to their level. This also meant that it was not feasible to follow Furr's suggestion of temporary groups as it would be too complicated to reform into new reading circles and then find a new text that no member had previously read (2007).

In his study, Furr describes the optimum number of group members as about five or six (2007). As I was using four roles, the ideal number of students in each group in my lessons would be four. However, it was not possible for me to control the number of members in each group to this extent as the students had to be grouped according to the result of the Macmillan reading level test that they took online. Generally, six to eight pupils in a class were classified as pre-intermediate and intermediate, with a few members classified as elementary level or upper intermediate. However, with a little flexibility regarding the number of roles within each group, this did not pose any serious difficulties. After forming the groups, there were six groups consisting of the ideal number of four members. Eleven groups had three members; in this scenario, the discussion leader's mandatory role was fixed; however, there was a probability of either a connector, summarizer or word master to be removed from each reading circle. Two groups had five members. I asked these groups to elect two discussion leaders for each reading circle. There was one upper-intermediate reading level group with only two members who chose to remain together rather than moving to a lower-level group. Two groups initially assigned as four and three member groups became a six-member circle as one student from the group of three withdrew from the university. I based this decision on individual dynamics within the pre-existing reading circles.

Students were required to submit a Google form with the notes they made for their individual role before each of the three reading circles and these were used as the formal assessment of this section of the course. Even within a regular, face-to-face classroom environment, I believe that monitoring all groups simultaneously and effectively evaluating each individual contribution would be unfeasible. In each class, there were approximately five or six groups simultaneously holding reading circles in Breakout Rooms.

A summary of the process of a typical reading circle in my classes and informal notes taken from my observation of an initial reading circle are presented below, followed by my overall reflections of the procedure.

The essence of reading circles is that they are peer-led while the teacher monitors the procedure and intervenes only when absolutely necessary (Daniels, 2002). In the first reading circle, one or two groups in each class needed encouragement from me to begin answering the discussion leaders' questions. However, in subsequent lessons, the reading circles were largely managed effectively by the group members without my intervention. Overall, my impression was that students, in general, greatly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss and share ideas in small groups. I believe that this was a

Table 2
Summary of Reading Circle Process

Approximate time frame	Description of activity in the reading circle process
10 minutes	The discussion leader asks the group their pre-prepared questions and facilitates the discussion, encouraging reticent students to speak.
5-8 minutes	The connector explains how they thought the book connected to their own life or the world around them. Depending on the group, members comment and share their own thoughts.
5-8 minutes	The word master shares five words or phrases from the book that they thought were important or difficult. They explain why they thought they were important and teach their group the meaning. Depending on the group, members comment and share their own thoughts.
2 minutes	The summarizer summarizes the book in about one minute.
10 minutes	Students choose the next book and assign new roles. In some groups, this stage was done out of class through the LINE groups they formed.
3 minutes	I share good examples from Google forms and student discussions in the main Zoom session.

Table 3
Informal Observation Notes from May 13th, 2021

One group using a lot of Japanese. Silence after discussion leader asked a question.
A couple of very effective connectors. In one group of all female students, members very active and able to relate the story (about a romance) to their own lives, "would you like a boyfriend like X?". By the end, they were sharing boyfriend stories and having a laugh in English.
Helping each other to understand, for example "what is holy bread?" and the vocabulary master explains.
Summarizer role seems difficult as we have not studied summarizing in depth yet.
The discussion leader part seemed the most effective in terms of creating an active reading circle environment. The majority of discussion was prompted by the discussion leader.
Word master and summarizer do not seem to hold very communicative roles and do not generate much discussion.
Some groups could continue for much longer than set time, other discussions dried up before the set time.

vital opportunity for students to communicate, especially because most of the spring semester was held exclusively online, limiting students' opportunities to interact with their peers. A key element of reading circles is having fun. According to Furr, "a spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room" (2007, p.17).

In terms of the use of role sheets, my perception was that these were effective in encouraging students to actively participate and cooperate together to understand various elements of the book. I observed in particular that the role sheets seemed to benefit students of a lower level of ability or those more reticent to participate in reading circles in as the content was prepared in advance.

One challenging issue for an instructor was the varying lengths of discussion within the reading circles. This was partly due to the varying group sizes in this study and also factors such as individual motivation and group dynamics. Groups that finished before the allotted time often needed my assistance to prompt additional discussion. Other groups appeared to be able and willing to engage in in-depth discussions for much longer than the set time. Overall, however, as discussion skills do not form part of this course's aims, I believe the time I allocated, i.e., approximately 30 minutes per reading circle, was appropriate.

Methodology

Participants

All four RW1 classes involved in the study were first years at Rikkyo University and on Level 2 courses (TOIEC scores above 480). A total of 75 students took part in the reading circles from four colleges; Arts, Sociology, Contemporary Psychology and Tourism in the spring semester, 2021.

Instruments

An anonymous Google form, written in both Japanese and English, was used to collect responses, which could be written in either language. Responses that were written in Japanese were translated by the author. Information about the research was written in both languages and explained verbally by the instructor. A total of 68 responses were received. Students were asked for their feedback regarding reading circles for the following areas:

- how much they enjoyed them
- if they felt their reading skills improved through participating in them
- whether or not the roles helped them when reading the book
- which roles they liked or disliked
- if they felt reading circles helped them to improve any skills other than reading.

Findings and Discussion

Prompts 1 and 2

Students were asked how much they had enjoyed the reading circles and to give reasons for their answers.

Figure 1
Participants' Responses to Prompt 1

I enjoyed reading circle activities
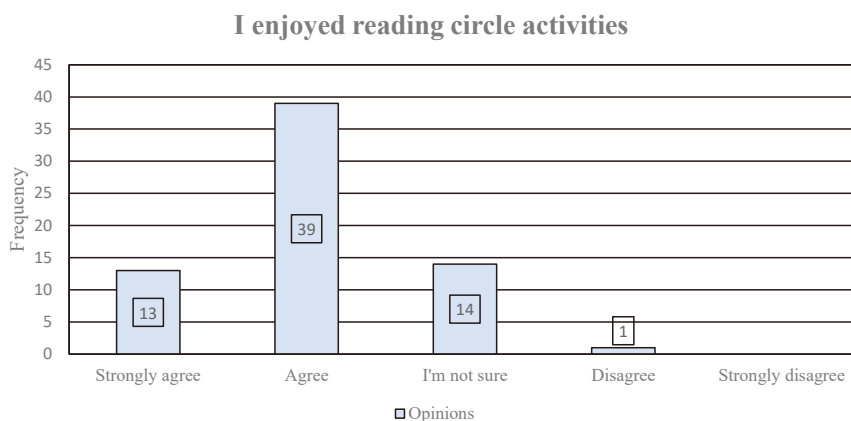
A total of 67 students answered this question. Over three quarters of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that reading circles were enjoyable. Most of the remaining students stated that they were not sure, with just one student disagreeing. Sixty-four students provided reasons for their

answers (prompt 2). The reasons given by those who enjoyed reading circles primarily fell into three categories; enjoyment due to social reasons, pleasure gained from the material being interesting and in English, and enjoyment of the discussions. Below is a selection of student comments:

- *Because I read English book[s] in earnest for the first time.*
- *I needed a lot of time to read stories, but I like to read stories and it was fun to share opinions with friends. Also, I could make friends through this activity.*
- *These activities w[e]re [a]good chance to read some books in English. I got new thing[s] about old stor[ies] and life in foreign countr[ies], and it was very interesting for me.*
- *I can enjoy talking with our group members. The talking was exciting and the time is not enough!*
- *Because I can be friend[s] with my team members.*

The comments appear to support my own observations that reading circles were not only valuable from a pedagogical viewpoint but also formed an important chance for students to communicate with their classmates, in addition to some students benefitting from longer discussion time. Reasons provided by students who did not feel positive about reading circles centered mainly on the reason of reading in English being difficult and a time-consuming activity:

- *For me, it's [to]o hard to read long sentence[s] in English.*
- *I need explanation sometimes.*
- *The number of words was too much.*
- *I enjoyed sharing my opinion with group members, but it was hard to find time to read books.*

These comments are pertinent as in my view; the RW1 course has a fairly heavy workload in terms of assignments. Reading circles could place an additional burden on weaker students and the emphasis on them being peer-led may be less effective for students who prefer more teacher-centered instruction.

Prompt 3 and 4

Respondents were asked to what degree and how they felt reading circles improved their reading skills.

Figure 2
Participants' Responses to Prompt 3
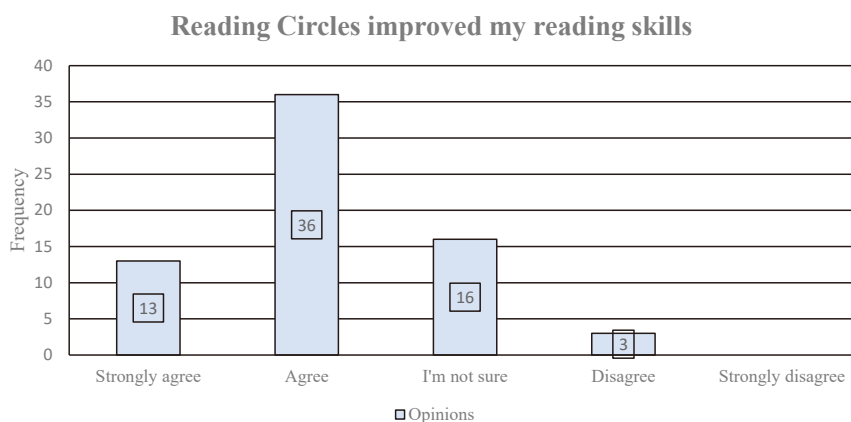
Of the 68 respondents, 49 agreed that reading circles improved their reading skills to a certain degree, 16 were unsure, and 3 perceived the activity as not improving their reading skills. Sixty-two

responses were recorded for prompt 4; however, some students misunderstood the question. Therefore, those answers were not included in this report. Fifteen of the comments received pertained to a perceived improvement in reading speed. Nine students felt it improved their vocabulary. From these positive comments, it can be deduced that students felt the act of reading graded readers improved their reading skills. However, no student mentioned the reading circles themselves as beneficial in terms of aspects discussed in the literature review, such as learning from peers. Therefore, it is difficult to confirm that the reading circles themselves were of value in this aspect. Only a few comments were received from students who did not feel reading circles improved their reading skills and these focused on the difficulty level of the task. A section of the student responses is listed below:

- *These books have some difficult words, so it improve[d] my vocabulary skills and helped me infer their meaning.*
- *I honestly didn't read everything but I read by skimming. This helped me to read faster.*
- *When I understood the gist of the story, it was interesting but because there were a lot of characters, I was often confused.*
- *The story was interesting but because it takes time, it was a heavy burden.*

Prompts 5 and 6

Respondents were asked to what degree they perceived their role as helpful whilst reading and for reasons to explain their answer.

Figure 3
Participants' Responses to Prompt 5
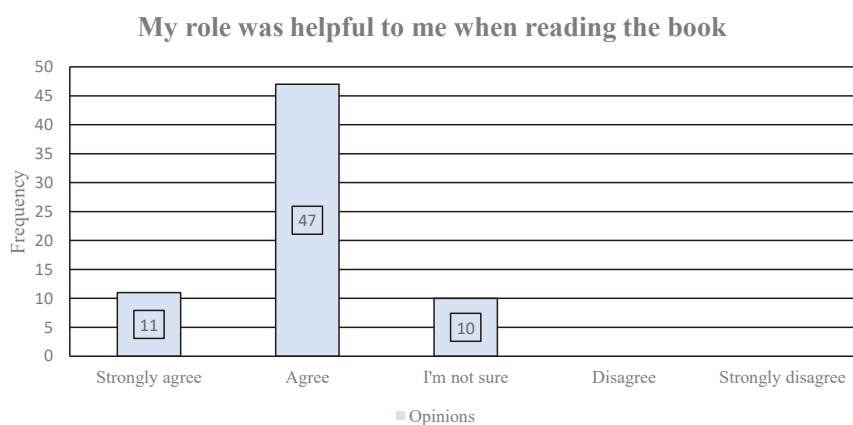
The responses to this prompt provided the clearest evidence in the survey; 58 of the 68 respondents felt the role was helpful to some degree, while the remaining students stated that they were unsure of the role's value. This data supports both my own observations of the value of the roles detailed previously in this report and the findings of previous research described in the literature review. Students felt that having a role helped them concentrate on the book, gave them a purpose to read and helped them to personalize the story and interact with it. However, one student felt that the role placed an additional burden on them.

- *I could think the story as my thing.*
- *[I] co[u]ld make target when [I] read*

- *We have to focus on the books, not just reading.*
- *These roles helped us not only read the story smoothly but also have my own opinions and ideas about the story. For example, connector should think about the similar parts of our lives and express it in English. And also, discussion readers pay attention to find the important points, which can improve our reading skills.*
- *While reading the story, I was aware of my rol[e] and thinking about it. So[,] it is useful to think deeply.*
- *The story in English is not easy to understand. So[,] I [couldn't] afford to think about my role.*

Prompts 7 and 8

Students were asked which role they preferred and why.

Figure 4
Participants' Responses to Prompt 7
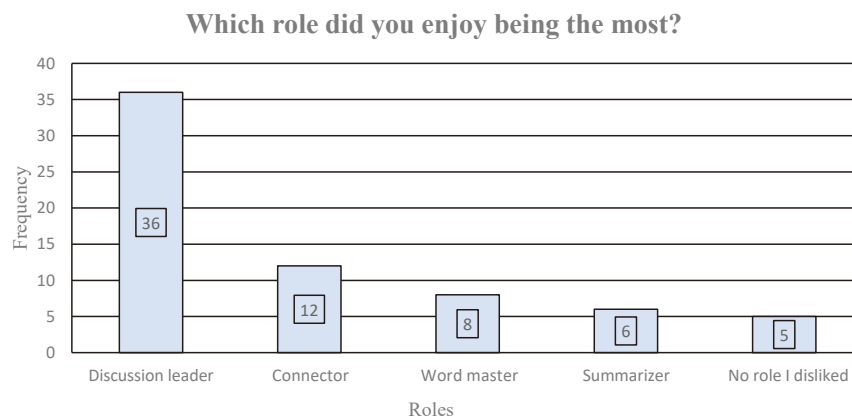
The most popular role was discussion leader, chosen by 36 of the 67 respondents. The connector the second favored role, was selected by 12 respondents. From the reasons provided in prompt 8, it appears that as highlighted by Daniels, reading circles can serve as a book club where readers can enjoy sharing their ideas (2002). In addition, it appears that the roles encouraged some students to engage in critical thinking too.

A selection of the reasons given is listed below:
- *We can interpret books just like reading in Japanese, and it's interesting. (connector)*
- *Because I often do this in my mind but I have not told other people. (connector)*
- *Because I can share some idea about the book with friends. (discussion leader)*
- *It is because I can hear other's opinions and it is interesting and surprising. (discussion leader)*

Prompts 9 and 10

Respondents were asked which role they disliked and why.

Over a third of the 68 respondents reported that there was no role they disliked. A quarter of the students selected the summarizer and all of their explanations highlighted the difficulty of that role. Twelve respondents disliked being the connector or word master respectively. The data reflects my

Figure 5
Participants' Responses to Prompt 9

Which role didn't you enjoy being?
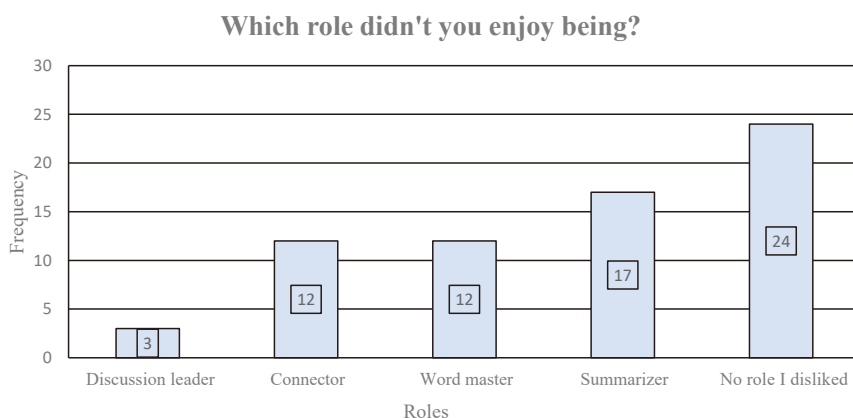
own perceptions of the summarizer role. During the course of observing the reading circles, I noted that this appeared to be the most difficult role for students. However, the skill of summarizing is a key component of the RW1 course, therefore I believe it was useful for students to focus upon this. Some of the comments from prompt 10 reveal the personal anxiety that certain roles caused. This was enlightening to me as I had been unaware of potential stress caused to the students by the roles.

A selection of comments provided is shown below:
- *Because I couldn't concentrate on the book's content. (word master)*
- *I mind telling words which I thought difficult to other members because others maybe think those words [are] easy. (word master)*
- *I read a sad book so I couldn't connect to my life. [A]lso when I connect[,] I become sad. (connector)*
- *Because it is hard to summarize the story. (summarizer)*

Prompt 11

Students were asked if they felt other skills improved through reading circles and if so, which skills.

Figure 6
Participants' Responses to Prompt 11

Did reading circles help you to improve other skills (not just reading)? If so, what skills?
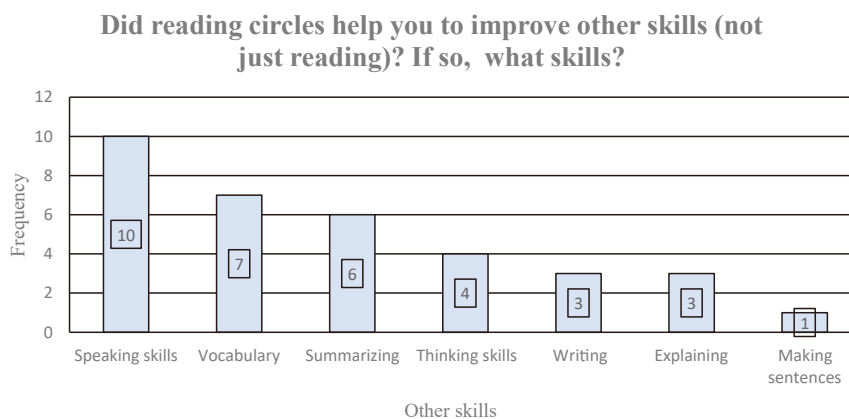
Fifty responses were recorded. However, 16 of the respondents misunderstood the question, stating that their reading skills had improved, and therefore their answers were omitted from this prompt. The majority of respondents selected speaking abilities, which is not unexpected considering that reading circles are discussion-based. The fact that the students believed their vocabulary and summarizing abilities had improved matches my predictions for the possible advantages of the roles associated with those areas. Four students answered "thinking skills," defining this as being able to think more in English or to be able to empathize more with characters in the books. Even for a course such as this, which aims to develop reading and writing skills, I believe it is beneficial to students when other skills also are fostered during lessons. As Shelton-Strong comments, reading circles can provide "a collaborative, multi-dimensional learning platform" (p.222, 2012). Selected responses are listed below:

- *I found many words that I didn't know. My vocabulary was enriched.*
- *I think my skill to think in English [has] improved.*
- *Thinking skill. For example, read English book and think the character`s feelings.*
- *I could express what I want to say in English.*

Conclusion

Overall, based on the feedback received and my personal classroom observations, it can be concluded that using reading circles in class was valuable in various ways. In particular, it seems that the using roles while conducting an extensive reading program was beneficial in helping students to personalize the reading experience. Moreover, the majority of students reported that they enjoyed the procedure, which I believe is an important facet as it could encourage students to persevere with extensive reading. However, I would urge caution if using reading circles with students of a lower-level reading ability. The feedback reveals that reading circles could potentially place an additional burden on students who find reading in English difficult. The use of reading circles with lower-level classes is an area of further potential research.

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Appendix

Explanation of the roles in reading circles (lesson 2)/prompts for the Google forms

Reading Circle Roles

Discussion Leader

You need to make the discussion interesting and make sure everyone speaks.

Make at least six discussion questions. You can use some questions from pages 10 and 11 in Reading the Future if you want but you must also have your own questions too!

Summarizer

You need to make a short summary of the book. Only talk about the most important events/points/ themes in the story.

Write your summary and try to keep it to about 1 minute in length.

Word Master

Find at least five words or phrases that you think are difficult in the story and IMPORTANT. (Words you didn't know the meaning of and had to check).

Teach your group the meaning and why you think these words/phrases are important

Connector

You need to think about how the story can be connected to your life or the world around you.

Think about things like:

-Something that happened in the story that is similar to something that happened to you

-Something that happened in the book that is similar to something in the news recently

- A character in the book similar to you or someone you know.

Talk for approximately 1 minute about it.