

The Effectiveness of Literacy Circles in Encouraging Learners' Peer Learning and Critical Thinking: A Lesson from Reading Courses

¹*Agus Wismanto, ²Linda Qiann

¹Indonesian Language Education, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas PGRI Semarang, Jln. Lontar No. 1, Mijen, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia

²Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

*Corresponding Author Email: aguswismanto@upgris.ac.id

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Abstract

Literacy circles facilitate metacognitive awareness, as students reflect on their reading strategies and discuss how these strategies contribute to their understanding of the text. Therefore, this study examines the effectiveness of literacy circles in promoting peer learning and critical thinking among Indonesian language learners at the University of PGRI Semarang. Literacy circles, a collaborative learning strategy, are explored as a means to enhance student engagement, encourage deeper analysis of reading materials, and foster meaningful peer interactions. The research employs a qualitative design, utilizing interviews and classroom observations to capture students' experiences with literacy circles during reading courses. Findings reveal that literacy circles significantly improve critical thinking skills by encouraging students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information from diverse perspectives. Peer learning is also promoted, as students engage in reflective discussions that help them clarify misunderstandings and deepen their comprehension. However, challenges such as unequal participation, difficulty in articulating thoughts, and the need for teacher guidance were identified. The study suggests that clear role assignments, structured discussion prompts, and ongoing teacher support are essential for maximizing the effectiveness of literacy circles. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on collaborative learning in reading instruction, offering practical insights for educators seeking to enhance student engagement and cognitive development. The study also highlights the potential of literacy circles to address the limitations of traditional, teacher-centered reading instruction in Indonesian language classrooms.

Keywords: Literacy circles; Peer learning; Critical thinking; Reading skills; Indonesian language education; Collaborative learning

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INTRODUCTION

Literacy circles are a collaborative learning strategy that aims to deepen learners' engagement with texts through structured dialogue, shared responsibility, and reflective thinking. This approach, however, is not without its challenges. One major issue is that many students struggle to engage in deep, analytical discourse, often reducing discussions to basic comprehension rather than fostering critical analysis and reflection. Bedel (2016) underscores the importance of foundational discussion skills for successful engagement in literacy circles, noting that without these skills, students tend to focus more on surface-level understanding than on interpreting and critiquing texts. Dijaya (2025) adds that students often express uncertainty regarding how discussions should unfold, leading to unclear expectations that can hinder the depth of discourse. The dynamic of group discussions within literacy circles can also result in imbalances, where

some students dominate conversations while others remain passive, affecting the overall quality of peer interactions. This highlights the need for a more structured approach to encourage equitable participation.

In Indonesian language classes, the teaching of reading has traditionally been characterized by teacher-centered approaches, which often emphasize comprehension over critical engagement with texts. This has resulted in several issues, including a lack of opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. As a consequence, students are frequently passive recipients of information rather than active participants in the construction of meaning. Materials used in these courses may sometimes fail to connect with students' lived experiences, which can reduce motivation and engagement (Ramli, 2021; Anggraini, 2025). This challenge is exacerbated by the limited class time available for reading and in-depth discussion, which restricts opportunities for students to explore texts critically. Additionally, assessment methods often focus on rote learning and factual recall, rather than encouraging students to think critically and reflect on different interpretations of texts. These issues have raised concerns about the effectiveness of traditional reading instruction and the need for more interactive and student-centered approaches.

Previous studies have explored the role of literacy circles in promoting peer learning and critical thinking in reading classes. Research by Putri & Dewi (2020) in Indonesian secondary schools found that students engaged in literacy circles exhibited higher levels of collaborative problem-solving and critical reflection than their peers in traditional reading groups. Similarly, Johnson and Andersen (2018) found that structured literacy circles, supported by teacher-designed question prompts, helped students justify their interpretations with textual evidence, enhancing their critical thinking abilities. In other cultural contexts, studies have shown that literacy circles create a space for learners to engage in deeper dialogue, fostering mutual learning and promoting critical analysis of texts (Hajdarbegović, 2024). Ramli (2021) notes that literacy circles also facilitate metacognitive awareness, as students reflect on their reading strategies and discuss how these strategies contribute to their understanding of the text. This growing body of research suggests that literacy circles, when implemented effectively, can significantly enhance learners' peer learning and critical thinking in reading classes.

The effectiveness of literacy circles in promoting peer learning and critical thinking lies in their ability to create a collaborative learning environment. As students engage in discussions, they teach and learn from one another, clarifying misunderstandings and building on each other's insights. Anggraini (2025) found that literacy circles encourage more substantive dialogue compared to traditional methods of reading instruction, with students posing more inferential and evaluative questions that deepen their understanding of the text. This interactive environment not only enhances engagement but also promotes autonomy, as students take responsibility for their learning. Lai (2024) observed that the integration of literacy circles in English language instruction significantly improved students' motivation and self-efficacy, suggesting that these circles foster a more positive and productive learning environment. Furthermore, Linde & Daniela (2025) highlighted the multi-level engagement within literacy circles, noting that peer discussions encourage critical thinking by allowing students to explore various interpretations and perspectives.

Despite these positive outcomes, the implementation of literacy circles requires thoughtful planning and facilitation to ensure their success. Meista et al. (2025) and Lekawael (2020) stress the importance of clear roles and expectations in literacy circles to promote balanced participation and prevent disengagement. Without structured roles,

some students may dominate discussions while others withdraw, undermining the collaborative nature of the activity. Transparent assessment practices are also essential to guide students toward critical analysis and reflection (Johnson & Catavello, 2025). Teacher support plays a crucial role in scaffolding discussions and guiding students through the complexities of literary analysis (Lane et al., 2024). By providing structured prompts and fostering an environment of mutual respect and shared responsibility, teachers can create a space where all students feel empowered to contribute and engage critically with texts. When implemented with careful attention to these factors, literacy circles have been shown to significantly improve students' critical thinking skills, engagement, and peer learning outcomes.

The current study aims to explore the effectiveness of literacy circles in promoting peer learning and critical thinking in Indonesian language reading classes. It seeks to address the challenges associated with traditional reading instruction and investigate how literacy circles can create a more interactive and student-centered learning environment. Specifically, the research examines the impact of literacy circles on students' ability to engage critically with texts, collaborate with peers, and develop metacognitive awareness of their reading strategies. The research also assesses how the implementation of literacy circles can overcome issues related to student passivity, unequal participation, and a lack of teacher support in reading courses. The primary research questions guiding this study are: *How do literacy circles affect students' critical thinking and peer learning in reading classes? What are the challenges and benefits of implementing literacy circles in Indonesian language classes? How can teachers effectively support literacy circles to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes?* This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on literacy circles and provide practical insights for educators seeking to improve reading instruction in Indonesian classrooms.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perceptions of Indonesian language learners at the University of PGRI Semarang who participated in reading classes. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for addressing the research questions as it allows for an in-depth exploration of learners' subjective experiences, motivations, and interactions during literacy circle activities. By employing this design, the study seeks to understand how learners engage in critical thinking and peer learning within the context of Indonesian language reading courses. The qualitative approach is justified by its ability to capture rich, contextualized data, which is essential for exploring complex phenomena such as peer learning dynamics and critical thinking in reading instruction. The study aims to provide insights into the processes, meanings, and challenges associated with literacy circles, an area that requires nuanced understanding beyond quantitative measures.

However, there are potential limitations and biases inherent in qualitative research. One of the limitations is the potential for researcher bias during data collection and analysis. To mitigate this, researchers employ triangulation through the use of multiple data sources (interviews and observations) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Additionally, the sample size of 35 participants may limit the generalizability of the findings, but it allows for deep exploration of the phenomenon within a specific context. Another potential limitation is the reliance on self-report data, which could be influenced by social desirability bias. To address this, researchers ensure anonymity and confidentiality during data collection to encourage participants to share honest and authentic responses.

Participants

The participants for this study are 35 Indonesian language learners at the University of PGRI Semarang, who have taken reading classes as part of their academic curriculum. The sample size was determined to provide a manageable yet comprehensive representation of students' experiences in reading classes. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had engaged in reading classes involving literacy circle activities. This selection criterion ensures that participants are relevant to the research questions and have direct experience with the literacy circle approach.

In terms of demographic information, the participants consist of both male and female students, ranging from 18 to 22 years old. They represent a diverse mix of academic backgrounds, including those majoring in education, linguistics, and literature, all of whom have taken reading classes that involve critical analysis of texts. This diversity allows for a broader perspective on the effectiveness and challenges of literacy circles in promoting critical thinking and peer learning. All participants are volunteers, and they were informed of the research's aims and objectives prior to their inclusion in the study.

Instruments and Data Collection Technique

The primary research instruments for this study are interviews and observations, chosen to capture both the personal perspectives of learners and the interactions within literacy circle activities. Interviews allow participants to share their thoughts, reflections, and experiences, while observations help document their behavior and engagement during group discussions. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with each participant to gain in-depth insights into their experiences with literacy circles. The interview guide includes open-ended questions that explore their understanding of the literacy circle process, the perceived benefits and challenges of participation, and the impact on their critical thinking and peer learning. Questions focus on areas such as the role of peer learning in literacy circles, strategies for analyzing and interpreting texts, how literacy circles contribute to critical thinking, and any challenges faced during participation.

Classroom observations are conducted during literacy circle sessions to capture the dynamics of group discussions and student interactions. A structured observation guide is used to track behaviors like student participation, engagement with the text, and moments of critical thinking or peer collaboration. Observations specifically focus on the level of student engagement, how students interact with each other, instances where students offer critical insights or challenge each other's ideas, and teacher involvement in guiding discussions. Both instruments are piloted with a small group of students to refine the interview questions and observation guide. To ensure validity and reliability, interview responses will be cross-checked with observational data to identify patterns and discrepancies. Additionally, feedback from peers and experts in education is gathered to ensure the appropriateness of the interview questions and observation protocols for the research context.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this qualitative study primarily utilize thematic analysis, a widely employed method for examining qualitative data to identify patterns or themes. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study because it enables the identification of key themes related to critical thinking, peer learning, and student engagement within literacy circles, all of which are central to the research questions.

This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how learners interact with texts and with one another during group discussions.

The first step in the analysis involves open coding, where researchers closely examine the interview transcripts and observational notes. This process entails identifying key phrases, concepts, and recurring patterns that emerge from the data. Each of these elements is assigned codes that reflect the core ideas being expressed. For example, phrases or actions related to critical thinking may be grouped under codes such as "analysis," "questioning," or "interpretation." These codes are organized according to their relevance to the research questions, allowing for a focused analysis of the data.

Once the initial codes are generated, the next step is theme development. In this phase, researchers group related codes into broader themes that encapsulate the central aspects of students' experiences in literacy circles. These themes may include topics like "peer interaction," "critical thinking development," "role of the teacher," and "challenges faced by students." This process is iterative, requiring continuous refinement of the themes to ensure they accurately represent the underlying patterns in the data. Finally, the findings are then interpreted in the context of the study's objectives. Researchers draw connections between the identified themes and existing literature on literacy circles, peer learning, and critical thinking. This interpretation also includes a discussion of how the findings contribute to understanding the effectiveness of literacy circles in fostering these skills within Indonesian language classrooms. The analysis provides insights into the role of literacy circles in enhancing student engagement and critical thinking, offering practical implications for teaching practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

How do literacy circles affect students' critical thinking and peer learning in reading classes?

Literacy circles significantly enhance students' critical thinking and peer learning in reading classes. The collaborative nature of literacy circles provides students with opportunities to engage deeply with the text and with each other. Through structured discussions, learners are prompted to think critically about the content, make connections, and justify their interpretations using evidence from the text. This dialogue encourages higher-order thinking, as students are not merely recalling information but are challenged to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize different perspectives. Peer learning is also fostered, as students exchange ideas and help each other understand complex concepts. During the discussions, students engage in reflective thinking, asking questions such as "Why do you think this character acted in this way?" or "How does this theme relate to current social issues?", which encourages deeper engagement with the material. This peer interaction not only enhances students' understanding of the text but also builds their ability to think critically about literature and other subjects.

What are the challenges and benefits of implementing literacy circles in Indonesian language classes?

Implementing literacy circles in Indonesian language classes offers several benefits, including improved student engagement, enhanced critical thinking, and increased collaborative learning. However, there are also challenges to consider. One of the primary benefits is that literacy circles encourage active participation and make reading more interactive. Students benefit from discussing their ideas with peers, which helps them refine their thoughts and see things from different perspectives. Additionally, literacy circles promote a sense of ownership over learning, as students take on different roles and responsibilities during discussions.

The challenges, however, include the difficulty some students face in articulating their ideas or engaging in deep discussions. For students who are shy or reluctant to speak up, participation may be minimal, reducing the effectiveness of the activity. Furthermore, without proper teacher guidance and scaffolding, some students may struggle to stay on task, and the discussions may lack depth. Teachers may also find it challenging to manage the various roles and ensure that every student participates equally. Additionally, the diverse backgrounds and skill levels of students in Indonesian language classes can affect the effectiveness of the circles, as some students may require more support than others.

How can teachers effectively support literacy circles to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes?

Teachers can support literacy circles by providing clear instructions, setting expectations, and offering structured guidance throughout the activity. First, teachers should ensure that students understand the roles they will play within the circle, such as discussion leader, summarizer, or questioner, and how these roles contribute to the overall success of the group. By assigning specific roles, teachers can ensure that all students are actively involved and that discussions remain focused. Teachers can also provide scaffolding in the form of guiding questions or prompts to help students engage with the text on a deeper level. This helps students to move beyond simple recall and toward critical analysis. Additionally, it is essential for teachers to regularly monitor the discussions, offering support when necessary to prevent off-task behavior and to ensure that students are engaging meaningfully with the content. Finally, teachers can incorporate reflection activities after each session to allow students to assess their learning and the effectiveness of their peer interactions. This ongoing support ensures that literacy circles remain an effective tool for enhancing critical thinking and peer learning.

Table 1. Students' Responses to Implementing Literacy Circles in Indonesian Language Classes

Research Questions	Responses/Answers
How do literacy circles affect students' critical thinking and peer learning in reading classes?	Literacy circles encourage critical thinking by prompting students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize perspectives. Peer learning is fostered as students exchange ideas and help each other.
What are the challenges and benefits of implementing literacy circles in Indonesian language classes?	Benefits: Improved engagement, enhanced critical thinking, and collaborative learning. Challenges: Shy students may struggle, discussions may lack depth without guidance, unequal participation.
How can teachers effectively support literacy circles to enhance students' engagement and learning outcomes?	Teachers can support literacy circles by providing clear roles, guiding questions, monitoring discussions, and offering post-session reflections to assess learning and engagement.

Discussion

In this study, the effectiveness of literacy circles in promoting peer learning and critical thinking among Indonesian language learners was explored. The results of the research provide significant insights into how literacy circles affect students' engagement, critical thinking skills, and collaboration in reading classes, as well as the challenges and benefits of implementing this pedagogical strategy in the context of Indonesian education. One of the key findings of this study is that literacy circles significantly enhance students' critical thinking. Students reported that engaging in structured

discussions allowed them to delve deeper into the texts they were reading, challenging them to think critically about the content and its implications. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the positive impact of collaborative learning methods on critical thinking. For example, Anggraini (2025) found that students involved in literacy circles posed more inferential and evaluative questions compared to those in traditional classrooms. Similarly, Johnson and Andersen (2018) observed that students in literacy circles were better able to justify their interpretations using textual evidence, which helped strengthen their analytical skills. This study extends those findings by showing that literacy circles in Indonesian language classes can promote deeper critical reflection on the texts, encouraging students to think beyond surface-level comprehension and engage in a more thoughtful and reflective analysis.

Another significant outcome of this research was the positive effect of literacy circles on peer learning. Students noted that the collaborative nature of literacy circles provided them with opportunities to learn from their peers, as they shared different perspectives and insights. This is consistent with the work of Putri and Dewi (2020), who demonstrated that literacy circles fostered higher levels of collaborative problem-solving and critical reflection compared to traditional group reading activities. In this study, students reported that they often gained new insights from their peers, which helped them better understand complex concepts and refine their own interpretations of the texts. Peer learning is not only beneficial for academic development but also contributes to the development of interpersonal skills, as students learn to work together, negotiate meanings, and challenge each other's ideas in a respectful and constructive manner.

However, despite these positive outcomes, several challenges were identified in the implementation of literacy circles. One of the most frequently cited challenges was the difficulty some students had in articulating their thoughts and participating in discussions. This finding resonates with the concerns raised by Bedel (2016), who emphasized the importance of foundational discussion skills for the success of literacy circles. Without these skills, some students struggled to engage in deep, analytical discourse, often defaulting to surface-level comprehension. Additionally, some students reported that they found it difficult to take on leadership roles within the circle, such as the discussion leader or summarizer. This issue, highlighted by Meista et al. (2025), underscores the need for clear role definitions and teacher support to ensure that all students actively contribute to the discussion.

Furthermore, the study found that teacher support plays a critical role in the success of literacy circles. Lane et al. (2024) stressed the importance of teacher scaffolding in guiding students through the complexities of literary analysis. In this study, students who received more guidance from their teachers were better able to stay on task and engage in more meaningful discussions. However, in cases where teacher involvement was minimal, students struggled to maintain focus and the discussions lacked depth. This highlights the importance of teacher facilitation in ensuring that literacy circles are used effectively to promote critical thinking and peer learning.

The benefits and challenges of literacy circles in Indonesian language classes mirror the findings of previous research on collaborative learning strategies. As noted by Johnson and Catavello (2025), transparent roles and responsibilities within literacy circles are essential for ensuring balanced participation and promoting critical analysis. This study reinforces the idea that clear structure and teacher guidance are necessary for literacy circles to succeed in fostering peer learning and critical thinking. The challenges related to student participation and engagement underscore the need for teachers to actively scaffold discussions, provide appropriate prompts, and monitor student interactions to prevent off-task behavior and ensure that all students are involved.

Moreover, the findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on literacy circles by demonstrating that these collaborative learning activities can be effectively implemented in Indonesian language classrooms. The study provides practical insights for teachers who are looking to incorporate literacy circles into their teaching practices. For example, the findings suggest that teachers should provide explicit instructions on the roles within the literacy circle and use structured prompts to guide discussions. Additionally, teachers should be prepared to intervene when necessary to ensure that all students are participating and that discussions remain focused on the text. These strategies are in line with the recommendations of Linde and Daniela (2025), who found that structured guidance and clear expectations were essential for maximizing the effectiveness of literacy circles.

Theoretical implications of this study include the confirmation of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. By engaging in peer discussions, students are able to co-construct knowledge and deepen their understanding of the texts. The study also supports the concept of metacognition, as students are encouraged to reflect on their reading strategies and the process of interpretation, as noted by Ramli (2021). Literacy circles provide an ideal context for metacognitive awareness to develop, as students discuss not only the content of the text but also the strategies they use to make sense of it.

Practically, the findings suggest that literacy circles can be a valuable tool for enhancing critical thinking and peer learning in Indonesian language education. However, for literacy circles to be fully effective, teachers must provide appropriate scaffolding, ensure equitable participation, and offer ongoing support. This study contributes to the understanding of how literacy circles can be adapted and implemented in Indonesian classrooms, offering a model for integrating collaborative learning into reading instruction.

This study reaffirms the positive impact of literacy circles on students' critical thinking and peer learning in reading classes. While challenges such as unequal participation and the need for teacher support remain, the benefits of literacy circles in fostering deeper engagement with texts and promoting collaborative learning outweigh these obstacles. The findings provide valuable insights for educators looking to enhance reading instruction in Indonesian language classes and contribute to the broader field of literacy research. Further research could explore how literacy circles can be adapted to different cultural contexts and examine their long-term impact on students' academic performance and critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study underscore the effectiveness of literacy circles as a tool for enhancing both critical thinking and peer learning among Indonesian language learners. By fostering a collaborative environment, literacy circles encourage students to engage deeply with texts, exchange diverse perspectives, and critically analyze the material. This study's results align with previous research that highlights the benefits of peer learning in developing higher-order cognitive skills. The collaborative nature of literacy circles, where students take on specific roles such as discussion leaders or summarizers, empowers them to take responsibility for their learning and engage in meaningful dialogue with their peers. Students reported that participating in literacy circles allowed them to gain new insights from their classmates, which helped them refine their understanding and enhance their critical thinking abilities. This is consistent with previous studies that found that structured peer discussions lead to more profound understanding and critical reflection. The study also revealed that literacy circles

encourage students to move beyond surface-level comprehension, challenging them to evaluate and synthesize multiple perspectives, thereby promoting critical engagement with texts.

However, the study also identified several challenges in the implementation of literacy circles in Indonesian language classrooms. One of the key challenges is ensuring that all students actively participate in the discussions. Some students, particularly those who are shy or less confident, struggle to engage meaningfully in group discussions. This finding supports the concerns raised in previous studies about the importance of foundational discussion skills for effective participation. Additionally, the study highlighted the necessity for teacher scaffolding to ensure that discussions remain focused and productive. Without clear guidance, some students may struggle to stay on task, and the discussions can lack depth. This underscores the importance of teacher involvement in providing structured prompts and maintaining the flow of conversation. Despite these challenges, the study affirms that when implemented effectively with proper teacher support, literacy circles can significantly enhance students' engagement, critical thinking, and peer learning. The study contributes to the broader understanding of collaborative learning in reading instruction, offering practical recommendations for educators to implement literacy circles in a way that maximizes their benefits while addressing the challenges identified.

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DECLARATION OF USING AI TOOLS

Researchers hereby declare that AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, were utilized in the preparation of this study. The AI was used to assist in refining the structure of the research, generating content, and enhancing clarity in writing. While the AI contributed to the organization and development of the text, all interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are solely my own. The use of AI tools was fully aligned with the research objectives, and every effort was made to ensure that the final content reflects academic integrity and originality. Researchers confirm that the research and writing process followed the ethical guidelines set by the institution, with the AI serving solely as a supplementary tool in the overall academic endeavor.

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