

Using Peer-led Story Discussions with Junior College EFL Learners

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The use of group reading helps learners become more actively engaged in meaning making through exchanging interpretations of texts. However, relatively little published research has focused specially on the process of how learners interact with each other to read and to interpret texts in the local context. The present study therefore aims to explore how Taiwanese junior college EFL learners constructed meaning from texts while participating in peer-led story discussions. Participants were grouped into 12 heterogeneous groups, each of which consisted of four second-year students with different levels of reading ability. They read eight simplified short stories of between 600-700 headwords over a period of eight weeks. Transcribed audiotapes of four representative discussions served as the major data source and were analyzed using Rosenblatt's (1994) definition of efferent and aesthetic transactions. Interviews and students' reading logs were collected to find out the focus group students' reading behaviors during the two-month long study. The findings revealed that the participants consistently moved beyond facts to critically examine the ideas given and became aesthetically involved in the text to develop reflective thoughts. By gaining new thoughts that they could not obtain while reading alone, the EFL

learners helped each other extend their thinking and venture more deeply into what they read.

Key words: group reading, efferent/aesthetic transaction, reader response, second language reading, simplified short stories

INTRODUCTION

In today's information society, the ability to read beyond the presented material to construct new knowledge has become crucial in our personal and professional lives. For example, readers are often now asked to read and synthesize from a variety of information sources. As such, readers must learn not just to decode but to evaluate the content read (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). However, a majority of English teachers in Taiwan spend almost the entire class time translating the text and analyzing the surface structure of language (Lee, 2007; Shiau, 2010). While literal comprehension is essential, readers need to activate their existing knowledge to interact with the text in order to construct something new such as an opinion or an evaluation (McMahon, 2008).

One way to promote the idea of interacting with the text for readers is through group reading. The use of group reading helps learners become more actively engaged in meaning making through exchanging interpretations of texts. In a collaborative context, students have opportunities to explore others' thinking about the text and get a different viewpoint on how and what others read (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001; Daniels, 2002; Dugan, 1997; Jalilifar, 2010). The results of studies conducted in the EFL classroom in Taiwan have revealed that group reading benefits students academically, cognitively, and affectively (Chane, 2003; Hu, 2006). However, not many of the studies have focused specifically on the process of how these readers actually interact with each other to advance their understanding of the readings. Therefore, it was the intention of this study to examine such a

process.

Language specialists have proposed various reasons for using literature in the EFL/ESL classroom (Ghosn, 2002; McKay, 2001). Stories, one popular literary genre, are conducive to engaging students in interpreting texts since they allow for a variety of interpretations. According to Langer (1995), individual interpretations might be shaped, reshaped, and altered by others while participating in story discussions. Therefore, in addition to examining the process of how students read together, it is also the intention of this study to examine how they learn to interpret literary texts. This study was an attempt to utilize peer-led story discussions in an EFL reading course at the junior college level to explore how a reading group constructed meaning from texts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to examine qualitatively the process of how EFL learners read and interpret stories by reading and discussing in groups. Two important theories have guided the design of this study. Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory have shaped how group reading can be examined in this study. Briefly, Rosenblatt's transactional theory allowed the researchers to categorize data collected. For example, the discussion transcripts were analyzed according to the two different stances of reading proposed by Rosenblatt. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning also helped the positioning of this study so that the interactional data collected could be examined in light of the different processes that learners might go through.

Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Rosenblatt (1978) developed a transactional theory of reading. She distinguished between an efferent stance and an aesthetic stance. The efferent stance pays more attention to the factual, the analytic, and the quantitative

aspects of meaning; the aesthetic stance pays more attention to the affective, the emotive, and the qualitative. Readers adopting an efferent stance concentrate on information that will be carried away from the text. Aesthetic readers, on the other hand, immerse themselves in the story world for a “lived-through” experience of the literary work. What is noteworthy is that Rosenblatt acknowledges that the same text is possibly read either efferently or aesthetically and that a predominant stance does not rule out fluctuations. Using the reading stances provided, the present study categorized the data according to the stances so that it will become clear the type of stances the readers were engaged in as they read together.

Dugan (1997) claims that most readers tend to read literature by relating to the work at a personal level such as relationships between human conditions and emotions. They need to have opportunities to respond aesthetically to foster appreciation. Rosenblatt’s treatment of aesthetic reading foregrounds the importance of affective development. Stories, one of the oldest literary forms in every culture, have been more commonly used in the EFL/ESL classroom to enhance learners’ affective growth in addition to linguistic development (Bushman & Hass, 2006; Carter & Long, 1991; Collie & Slater, 1994; Ghosn, 2002). Stories also present readers with plots where problems need to be resolved and with characters who need to overcome difficulties. Readers tend to identify with characters and connect the stories to their personal experiences. Therefore, stories can be the stimulus for personal growth if they are stories that students can relate to and respond to emotionally are selected.

As for the implications for teaching, Rosenblatt (1994) advocates a response-oriented classroom where students are encouraged to express and share their thoughts, emotions, and comments freely, and where individual interpretations are received and all personal contributions are valued. Teachers serve as facilitators of the learning process instead of being enablers for the transmission of knowledge. Students are considered active constructors of their knowledge and understanding rather than as the receivers of knowledge. As claimed by Dunkelblau (2007), when students

realize they have a role in determining meaning, they become more reflective and independent readers. In Carlisle's (2000) study, Taiwanese junior college EFL learners particularly remarked how they enjoyed being given the space to express their own feeling. Rosenblatt's perspectives are in line with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which views cognitive development as a primarily social act.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

In addition to the use of Rosenblatt's various stances, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also influenced the current study in terms of how learning occurs through interaction. As such, the type of interaction that occurs during story discussions became the focus of attention in this study. More specifically, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that learning and development are inherently social. Vygotsky maintains that learning is closely tied to social interactions within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level in which a child can perform a task on his own and the level of potential development in which a child can perform a task with more knowledgeable others. Student collaboration in discussion groups is viewed as ZPD, where learners can construct meaning through both a social process and an individual internalization process. Groups provide opportunities for students to interact with others and to take up the role of more capable peers in relationship to particular texts (Klingner & Vaughn, 2000). Therefore, learners are more likely to organize and clarify the text in new ways so that their interpretations can be easily understood (Ghaith & El-Malak, 2004).

Sustaining interaction through peer reading has long been supported by reading specialists and educators. A substantive body of research has indicated that group discussions of texts benefit students academically and cognitively (Almasi et al., 2001; Berne & Clark, 2006; Day, 2008; Jalilifar, 2010). For example, results from Ghaith and El-Malak's (2004) research have provided empirical evidence that peer-led discussions of texts are more

effective than the traditional teacher-centered method in facilitating higher order reading comprehension of university students. Higher order comprehension is defined as the ability to interpret and judge the appropriateness of information. Working together to summarize, elaborate, and report information to teammates enhances the subskills involved in interpretive and critical comprehension.

Studies reporting on peer-led discussions of stories have found that group reading often begins with a series of literal retellings of setting, characters, and plot. With repeated practice opportunities, summaries are replaced with related comments and analysis through connecting and building on the ideas of others (Morrow, 2005). In Lehman and Scharer's (1996) study, readers became more able to recognize the author's literary techniques such as imagery, symbolism, and foreshadowing. Similarly, Carrison and Ernst-Slavit (2005) documented their ESL learners moving from not knowing how to respond to texts to becoming experts at making sense of literary works by using contextual clues and relating the reading to their own experiences.

Most studies conducted with peer-led story discussions in the local context have examined the effects of textual discussions on students' reading achievement (Chane, 2003; Hu, 2006). Despite the achievement gains under peer discussions, few of these studies have explored how students benefit from social interactions with others in group work. Shiau (2010) analyzed the student-generated questions for story discussions recorded on the worksheets. The findings have suggested that students became more able to read critically and more deeply. However, little is known concerning how students practiced and developed their critical thinking and how they explored deeper into the text while participating in peer-led story discussions. The present study therefore fills this gap by investigating students' collaborative reading process through their verbal interactions during group learning and other actual classroom data. In other words, this study hopes to shed light on the detail of the reading process by examining qualitative data collected during student interaction as students participated in group reading tasks.

METHOD

Classroom Context

This study took place in an EFL reading class with 44 female and four male second-year students from the five-year program at a junior college.¹ Students were divided into 12 heterogeneous teams based on their scores in this required reading course in the second semester of the first academic year. As asserted by Coelho (1992), the studies on the effects of different kinds of grouping strongly recommend that students should be organized into heterogeneous groups for optimal learning. Heterogeneity of achievement levels maximizes peer tutoring and serves as an aid to classroom management. With a high achiever on each team, introduction of new materials becomes easier. Each team consisted of one high-achiever, two middle-achievers, and one low-achieving student. Their linguistic proficiency varied from high-beginning to low-intermediate levels. The EFL learners' ages ranged from 17 to 19 years old and they majored in applied English.

The first author, the teacher-researcher whose classroom was under direct or immediate investigation, has been teaching English and playing a role as homeroom teacher in this junior college for 12 years. Her personal philosophy on education had been as follows: group work yields a number of advantages for the English language classroom—namely, increased language practice opportunities, an embracing affective climate, and promotion of learner responsibility and autonomy.

Prior to the inception of this research project, students had participated in small-group discussions of essays or articles as an important part of this EFL reading class for three and a half semesters. In the later half semester of the second academic year, students switched to read eight simplified short stories,

¹ The second year in a five-year program is equivalent to the second year in a senior high school. The level of achievement recognized by a student after five years of study in a junior college in Taiwan is similar to that of after two years of study in a community college in the United States.

chosen from three beginning-level graded readers with 600-700 headwords, for eight weeks. Two of the graded readers, *Sherlock Holmes Short Stories* and *Stories from the Five Towns*, were produced by Oxford Bookworms Library (2000) and one graded reader, *The Last Leaf and Other Stories*, was produced by Macmillan Readers (2005). The original instructional procedures were as follows: (1) the teacher reading aloud the short story, (2) peer-led group discussions of stories, (3) whole-class debriefing sessions of discussions, and (4) students writing reading logs. One procedure “sharing good examples of reading logs” was established from the third lesson.

In the first lesson, guided questions were utilized initially as a model to talk productively about the story. In the subsequent lessons, each student was required to generate three questions for each small-group discussion and jotted them down in their reading log. Students consulted a guide adapted from Raphael and McMahon (1994) for ideas regarding writing responses. Four categories were included in the guide: (1) character map, (2) sequences, (3) story critique, and (4) me and the story. A few excellent student-generated questions and log excerpts were also shared in class to offer a springboard for lively story discussions and a model of how engaged readers “dialogue” with texts.

Participants

This study examined a reading group that was selected due to the fact that they had the best discussion proficiency in that their discussions were the most fruitful. The assumption was that the most proficient group would comprehend beyond surface meaning and explore issues in-depth, thereby demonstrating their sophisticated thinking about the texts. This assumption was appropriate to make because of the pilot study done prior to the study. Prior to this study, all 12 groups were audiotaped at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the previous semester as they engaged in verbal interactions. Initial analysis of the audiotapes of these discussions suggested that a pattern of discussion was emerging. At the same time, the pattern matched what Almasi et al. (2001) called discussion proficiency. This

discussion proficiency refers to group members responding to one another, extending others' comments by asking questions, supporting ideas by referring to text, and asking questions to clarify text. As a result, the group with the highest frequency of these characteristics was selected to be the focus group which consisted of three female students and one male student.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources included: (a) videotapes and audiotapes of story discussions of the focus group, (b) semi-structured interviews and informal interviews with four target students, and (c) target students' reading logs. Story discussions and interviews were all conducted in students' first language (i.e., Chinese) to prevent the interference of their less-than-good oral English skills, thus providing more valid data to examine students' reading comprehension (Bernhardt, 2003).

Among the transcribed audiotapes of the eight discussions collected, four representative discussions were selected for in-depth analysis to understand how the EFL learners read and participated in group reading. We chose to concentrate on the first, middle, and last story discussions for analysis to capture any changes that might have occurred over the eight-week time frame. The discussions of the second story (i.e., *The Last Leaf*), the fifth (i.e., *The Car is Waiting*), and the eighth (i.e., *The Silent Brothers*), together with the sixth story (i.e., *The Speckled Band*) were chosen, totaling four representative discussions. The sixth discussion session was included due to students' talk about three literary elements in *The Speckled Band*. The unit of analysis was an utterance which refers to "what is said by any one person before or after another person begins to speak" (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1998, p. 493).

The discussion transcripts were first analyzed with a framework modified and expanded from one originally created by Eeds and Wells's (1989), which had five categories: (1) literal comprehension, (2) interpretation, (3) evaluation, (4) involvement, and (5) conversation maintenance. As conversation maintenance aimed at controlling and managing the discussion process and at clarifying the reading log task, it was renamed "procedural

talk.” One category, “off-task chatting,” was added. Off-task chatting contained all utterances which digressed from the topic at hand.

The first three categories (i.e., literal comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation) and the fourth category (i.e., involvement) reflected what Rosenblatt (1994) called efferent and aesthetic reading respectively. Simply put, the efferent stance pays more attention to the factual and the analytic aspects of meaning, while the aesthetic stance pays more attention to the affective and the emotive. Therefore, students’ verbal interactions were further analyzed following Rosenblatt’s definition of efferent and aesthetic transactions. There were 1,376 utterances in the group. Distribution of the four categories of the students’ talk during story discussions was summarized in Table 1. The categories of the utterances were analyzed quantitatively in order to examine interesting patterns that occurred during group reading tasks. However, once the patterns were found, further analysis of the data was performed so as to find evidence to support the actual process that the readers went through.

TABLE 1
Categories of Utterances Produced During Story Discussions

	Efferent transaction	Aesthetic transaction	Procedural talk	Off-task chatting	Total utterances per story
<i>Last Leaf</i>	123 ^a (48%) ^b	47 (18%)	51 (20%)	34 (13%)*	255
<i>Car is Waiting</i>	167 (45%)	25 (7%)	56 (15%)	124 (33%)	372
<i>Speckled Band</i>	274 (58%)	17 (4%)	32 (7%)	151 (32%)	474
<i>Silent Brothers</i>	191 (69%)	15 (6%)	16 (6%)	53 (19%)	275
Total utterances per category	755 (55%)	104 (8%)	155 (11%)	362 (26%)	1376

^a Total utterances of the category per story. ^b Percentage of utterances of the category/story.

*Note. Percentages may not add up to 100%, as they were rounded to the nearest percent.

Interview data in conjunction with target students' reading logs were analyzed to identify codes and categorize the recurrent patterns, following the content analysis procedure (Patton, 2002). The discussion excerpts and interview excerpts were translated from Chinese into English by the researchers. Errors in students' reading log entries written in English were kept intact since level or depth of response, not linguistic accuracy, was the primary concern for data analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The goal of this paper was to address the issue of how EFL learners read as a group while participating in peer-led discussions of stories. The findings suggested that the participants moved beyond facts to analyze the ideas given and lived through the text to generate aesthetic responses during the discussions. Through efferent analyses and aesthetic responses, students practiced and developed critical thinking and reflected on significant issues. The process of how students learned to engage in critical and reflective talk about stories will be described in more detail through the analysis of efferent and aesthetic transactions.

Efferent Transactions

The focus group produced two types of efferent reading, namely searching for facts and analyzing input. Students regularly began their group reading to obtain particular information they deemed necessary to resolve the confusing parts of the text. This is what we called the first type of efferent reading: to get the story facts. Once students were able to resolve their difficulty in comprehension, they then collaboratively engaged in analyses of the text and peers' questions. This is what we called the second type of efferent reading: to create analytic meaning. To provide an initial overview of how students read efferently, two different types of efferent transactions surfaced and

distribution of the two categories of students' talk during the discussions of the four stories are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Efferent Transactions and Distribution of Utterances Across the Four Stories

Story	Type I: Getting story facts	Type II: Analyzing information
<i>Last Leaf</i>	Clarification of confusing parts 58 (47%)	Character 65 (53%)
<i>Car is Waiting</i>	Clarification of confusing parts 41 (25%)	Author's background and title 126 (75%)
<i>Speckled Band</i>	Clarification of confusing parts 131 (48%)	Plot, symbol, and setting 143 (52%)
<i>Silent Brothers</i>	Clarification of confusing parts 103 (54%)	Narrative technique and peers' questions 88 (46%)

According to Table 2, the utterances devoted to Type II efferent reading was greater in number than those devoted to Type I except for the discussion of *The Silent Brothers*. Compared to other stories read in this project, *The Silent Brothers* was lengthier and more complicated largely due to the fact that the author used the narrative technique of flashback to insert past events during the occurrence of current events to provide background information. In other words, while the students were reading the story, they had to be able to distinguish between past events and current development of the story. Therefore, they devoted more utterances to trace the plot development.

Table 2 also shows that there was a greater variation in Type II efferent reading than in Type I across the four discussion sessions. In other words, students consistently identified the confusing sources and resolved the confusion while getting the story facts. However, during the process, they constructed different aspects of analytic meaning of the information they encountered. Their analysis focus shifted from the character in *The Last Leaf* to the author's background and title in *The Car is Waiting*, then to the plot, symbol and setting in *The Speckled Band*, and finally to the story's narrative technique and their peers' questions in *The Silent Brothers*. Without the

teacher's guidance, students purposefully examined the ideas presented to them. Their analyses were supported with reasons.

Although the EFL learners were still engaging in partial literal retellings at this stage of discussions, they become more critical as they moved from character to peers' questions. Ennis (1987) refers critical thinking to "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 10). Students' talk about their peers' questions raised during discussing the final story, *The Silent Brothers*, will be cited to illustrate how they thought carefully to decide on the plausibility of good expandable questions.

At the beginning of the study, the questions generated for discussion in this group were often factual ones that could be easily answered. With repeated opportunities for practice, students improved the quality of their questions. Simply put, they shifted from factual questions to expandable questions which required deeper processing of the text. Students were able to distinguish between questions that probed factual knowledge and those that stimulated thinking. The following excerpt exemplifies this.

Discussion Excerpt 1

Lisa: OK. I'll ask a question first. Why did the two brothers' older sister write her will like that?

Joe: What did she write?

Lisa: I mean the content of her will. Why would she give all her money to the one who marries Annie?

Joe: I want to write, "How many flowers did the lady wear in her hat?"

Lisa: [(Giggles)]

Wendy: [(Giggles)]

In the above excerpt, Lisa asked good questions, intending to extend her teammates' thinking. Her intention was not realized because Joe acted silly. It is noteworthy that when interviewed later, students had a clear notion that

bad questions could not help them actually think deeply about the text because the answers were obvious. Due to peer pressure, one student even proclaimed that she would not ask any simple questions.

Interview Excerpt 1: Lisa, 3rd Interview

Researcher: So you define lousy questions as questions that can be answered with textual information.

Lisa: No, I mean the answer is readily apparent.

Researcher: Why?

Lisa: Because it cannot extend your thinking and it is not expandable. If you write simple questions, your peers will laugh at you. Take Joe's as an example, "How many flowers are there in the lady's hat?"

Another group member expressed that hard questions pushed them to scrutinize the text and activate their thinking effectively. She indicated that hard questions required reasoning and support in their answers:

Interview Excerpt 2: Wendy, 3rd Interview

Wendy: My peers became more competent at generating hard questions which were worth exploring.

Researcher: How do you define hard questions?

Wendy: The question about the will is a good example.

Researcher: Do you mean the one posed by Lisa about the implicit meaning of the will?

Wendy: Exactly. We need to give reasons to explain why the two brothers' sister wrote the will, which was not so easy.

In Wendy's and Lisa's view, good questions were expandable. This type of question required readers to consider how ideas in the text related to one another. Therefore, expandable questions were usually tough and thought-provoking in nature.

Students also gave their teammates advice against writing factual questions in reading logs. An example of such advice is presented in the following excerpt.

Discussion Excerpt 2

Joe: How many meters do they keep while they walked? Fifty, right?

Lisa: Fifty, no, it's five meters.

Joe: Right, then I can write this down in my reading log. *How long?*

This question requires you to pay attention to the details. What a "good" question!

Sharon: Where can I find the part of *how long* Joe just mentioned in the text?

Wendy: *How long?* What do you mean *how long?*

Joe: Do you really want to write that down in your log?

Wendy: Mm...Here you go. *One man five meters behind the other...*

Sharon: This question is weird. I'll delete it.

When asked why advising against writing the question, Joe explained that factual questions could not help his fellow group members explore deeper into the text. This kind of question would bring their grades down since none of the model questions the teacher provided were factual questions.

Interview Excerpt 3: Joe, 3rd Interview

Joe: I said I was going to write the question about the distance the brothers kept while walking because I like spoofing. That was a really bad one. Such details have nothing to do with the comprehension of the story. I worried that this kind of meaningless question would bring Sharon's grade down I think good questions are like those posed by Lisa. Her questions are expandable and cannot be answered by specific reference to the story. For instance, she wrote "Why would Holmes like the lady's photo?" in our previous discussion meeting. You've got to

think carefully about it.

By the same token, when interviewed later, Sharon stated that she couldn't ask factual questions because the answers were fixed.

Interview Excerpt 4: Sharon, 3rd Interview

Sharon: I avoided the question because the answer is apparent. I am not able to generate expandable questions yet. I've tried but I don't know where to find the text potential for posing such questions or how to express them in English. My peers are really good at asking this kind of question.

Sharon is the low-achieving reader in this group. Because of her limited reading abilities, it was difficult for her to pose expandable questions. However, Sharon's statement about avoiding factual questions implied that she acquired a better understanding of good, expandable questions through observing how and what her peers read. The finding is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) contention that learning might occur incidentally as learners observe the thinking processes of their peers in group discussions.

Kong and Fitch (2003) declared that students needed to ask "fat, juicy questions" that did not have the right or wrong answers to promote cognitive skills. Over a span of two months, the EFL readers in this study generated fewer factual questions that could be easily answered by specific textual information and more expandable questions that pushed others to make significant and critical observations of the text. This can be seen in student-generated questions recorded in student's log entries. Table 3 provides the number and percentage of student-generated questions categorized as factual and expandable questions recorded in each of the last six log entries analyzed. As mentioned in the Data Collection and Analysis, each student was required to generate 3 questions from the third (*A Lesson in Love*) till last class meeting. For each story discussion, there were a total of 12 questions recorded in 4 target students' log entries. In the entries of *A*

Lesson in Love, equal numbers of the two categories of questions were found. The high percentage of expandable questions recorded in the entries of *The Car is Waiting* might be attributed to the characteristics of the story. The story was full of room for interpretations and analyses because the author purposely left out details about much of the characters' behavior. In the last log entries (*The Silent Brothers*), expandable questions (67%) produced by students outnumbered factual ones (33%).

TABLE 3
Categories of Student-Generated Questions Recorded in Reading Logs

	Factual questions	Expandable questions
Lesson in Love	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
Jeweler's Wife	4 (33%)	8 (67%)
Car is Waiting	3 (25%)	9 (75%)
Speckled Band	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
Scandal in Bohemia	5 (42%)	7 (58%)
Silent Brothers	4 (33%)	8 (67%)
Total questions per category	28 (39%)	44 (61%)

That students became more capable of generating expandable questions is particularly significant to EFL instruction in Taiwan where many of the class hours are spent on translating the text and checking students' answers to comprehension questions (Lee, 2007; Shiao, 2010). It is true that teachers may ask good questions to lead students to think deeply about the text. However, in this study, peer-led group discussions required students to be independent from the teacher to generate good questions on their own. They learned as independent readers who helped each other extend their thinking and critically examine what was being read and what was asked by their peers. By expanding on their peers' reasoning, they recognized that reading was more than just another way to get the story facts and to analyze the presented materials. Reading could help them reflect on their own daily issues through evolving personal feelings and sensations. In the section to come, students' aesthetic transactions, which center on their reflective

thoughts, will be explored further.

Aesthetic Transactions

The participants in this study were living through the experience of the story by articulating their emotional reactions, entering into the story world, and making character evaluations. The focus group's aesthetic responses across the four texts are listed in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Aesthetic Transactions Across the Four Stories

Story	Aesthetic Reading
<i>The Last Leaf</i>	Personal engagement
<i>The Car is Waiting</i>	Personal engagement
<i>The Speckled Band</i>	Personal engagement
<i>The Silent Brothers</i>	Character evaluation

The EFL learners' two types of aesthetic reading, personal engagement and character evaluation, occurred in three different situations. They first occurred in discussion sessions when students thought deeply and carefully about issues facing story characters. In spite of only 8% of aesthetic utterances (see Table 1), each participant activated an aesthetic frame of mind to construct personal meaning throughout the entire study, as shown in Table 5. Table 5 details the number of utterances categorized as efferent and aesthetic transaction for each of the students in each of the four story discussions analyzed.

TABLE 5

Distribution of Efferent and Aesthetic Utterances Across the Four Stories

Student	<i>Last Leaf</i>		<i>Car is Waiting</i>		<i>Speckled Band</i>		<i>Silent Brothers</i>	
	Efferent	Aesthetic	Efferent	Aesthetic	Efferent	Aesthetic	Efferent	Aesthetic
Wendy	36	8	30	1	51	5	46	1
Lisa	30	6	31	8	87	5	40	2
Joe	34	18	59	11	76	3	63	5
Sharon	23	15	47	5	60	4	42	7
Total	123	47	167	25	274	17	191	15

Students' aesthetic involvement in the text also occurred in the students' reading logs. Students reflected on various real-life issues such as honesty by thinking about a character they liked or disliked. It is noteworthy that while all categories except the category of "sequence" in the reading log aimed at guiding all students in the class to express their personal engagement and evaluative comments about the story, not all of them followed the instruction. Some described what the character(s) did without explaining why they liked or disliked the character(s). Some simply wrote a story summary. Others described their misunderstandings of the text. Therefore, the focus group students' written responses that indicated engagement ensured their aesthetic transactions with the materials they were asked to read. Moreover, the aesthetic reading occurred in the interviews with the teacher-researcher as well. The EFL readers revisited the text and extended their small-group textual talk to reflect on daily issues.

In the three contexts of aesthetic transactions, the EFL readers comprehended story events through analogy to self or world and achieved a generalized belief or understanding about life while thinking reflectively about life. Examples taken from the discussion of *The Car is Waiting*, a story with the theme of false pretense, will be cited for elaboration. In this story, a pompous young woman pretended to be a noble lady and tried to impress a man in the park who she assumed to be ordinary. The ending

shows that the man was the wealthy owner of the big white car, which the woman pretended to own. Students entered into the story world to make personal engagement by asking each other what they would do if they were a certain character.

Discussion Excerpt 3

Lisa: If you were *Mr. Parkenstacker*, would you reveal the lady's lies?

Joe: Would you?

Sharon: If you were the lady, would you claim to be a rich person?

Joe: Doesn't the lady have anything better to do?

Lisa: If you were the lady, would you lie to the man?

Although students did not respond to their peers' questions, they wrote in their reading logs their insights that lies and truth coexisted in life. Truth does not always triumph over lies. Truth can be painful and embarrassing. One student wrote,

I like Mr. Parkenstacker; even he lied to the young woman but he is very gentle that he didn't reveal her . . . Lie can be a "white lie", not every lie is bad. Some of them is people don't want to hurt you. Sometimes we says white lie, too. That is because we want to protect someone don't get hurt. (Lisa's 5th log entry originally written in English)

From Lisa's perspective, white lies are necessary in life because true statements may hurt people. White lies seemed to help Lisa perceive reality and broaden her views of what was possible.

A couple of students answered their peers' questions through giving themselves agency in the story in later interviews. They mentioned that they would react like the male character, Mr. Parkenstacker, who did not reveal the female character's lies about her lavish lifestyle. In other words, they

believed that the way Mr. Parkenstacker interacted with the female character was appropriate. One student said,

Interview Excerpt 5: 2nd Interview, Joe

Joe: Take the story which is about the young woman who indulged herself in the romance stories she read as an example. If I met her, I would behave like the male character.

Researcher: You won't reveal her lies?

Joe: I think that if I reveal her lies, both of us will get embarrassed. So, I'll be an onlooker who just smiles at her. I know what she said isn't real, which is fine with me, though.

Researcher: You want to help her save face.

Joe: Right, that's right. It will be very weird if I don't do so. We will never meet again because she may feel like she's kind of lost face.

Having dialogues around the story allowed the EFL learners to gain new insights that they could not have obtained while reading alone since they had the opportunity to explore their peers' aesthetic responses. In Discussion Excerpt 3, students first invited one another to put themselves in the place of the characters. Then, by justifying the actions they would take in certain story circumstances, they reflected upon white lies and social interactions. They changed their view of lies and became more sensitive to what other people might be feeling (see Lisa's 5th log entry and Interview Excerpt 5). Apparently, the EFL readers revisited the text not to search for answers to comprehension exercises at the end of the story, but rather to answer their peers' hypothetical questions. In other words, they went back to the stories discussed previously to venture on to the topics they found personally meaningful. Meaningful understanding of the texts permitted students to gain insights into themselves and the society within which they live. This finding is in accordance with Kong and Pearson (2003), who argued that group reading opened opportunities for students to discuss human issues which helped them explore their own worldviews.

In addition to experiencing the text as a source for reflection, students in peer-led story discussions had opportunities to chat with their peers. In this study, off-task chatting was pervasive throughout students' group work, accounting for 26% of the group reading discourse (see Table 1). This result is similar to that of Alley's (2005) study, in which 21% of the student discourse fell into the category of off-task talk. On many occasions, it was natural for the EFL learners to deviate from the task. They chatted about class business or assignments for other courses. They also initiated off-task conversations once they found connections between the reading materials and popular culture such as movies, music, and TV commercials. One student reported, "As we became familiar, we tended to chitchat. I didn't care about the videotaping" (3rd interview, Joe). In other words, the more familiar students became with each other, the more they were likely to digress from the topic at hand.

Through the eyes of the EFL learners, chatting enhanced their interpersonal relationships and created a more relaxing atmosphere. Such a supportive group environment was favorable to group interaction and peer assistance. As remarked by one student, "We are always willing to provide linguistic help to our teammates in need while writing reading logs unless no one knows how to express the words and phrases in English" (3rd interview, Joe). Such finding supports the assertion by Alley (2005) that off-task talk promoted an effective group environment conducive to peer tutoring. Therefore, instead of forbidding students to chitchat, the teacher emphasized that no delayed reading logs would be accepted. In order to hand in log entries before the class was dismissed, there was always someone who would bring his or her group back to the focus of the text. It seemed that writing reading logs helped keep students on task since most of them handed in their assignments on time. The focus group students' aesthetic stance toward the texts lingered on in their log entries.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has shown that the EFL learners could dissolve the barriers in comprehension to construct analytic meaning and engaged in a lived-through experience of the texts to generate self-induced aesthetic responses while participating in peer-led story discussions. By gaining new thoughts that they could not have obtained while reading alone, they helped each other venture more deeply into the reading materials. Although students had limited linguistic proficiency ranging from high-beginning to low-intermediate levels, they were able to make meaningful transactions with the writers by means of the printed page. Therefore, instead of viewing reading as an intrapersonal problem-solving task involving decoding of the printed words, second language reading, even at the beginning stage, should be viewed as an interactive transaction between the reader and the text.

Likewise, as the EFL learners were independent thinkers who drew on their background knowledge and personal belief to construct personal unique interpretations of what they read, teachers should be facilitators of the learning process. That is to say, instead of transmitting only one correct and privilege interpretation, teachers should encourage students to express their opinions and comments freely, and receive and value individual interpretations. Reading logs are the most direct and permanent tool for involving students in examining the text and exploring their feelings. Teachers should also share a few excellent excerpts from students' log entries to model critical and reflective thinking. Similar to Boyle's (2000) idea, teachers can select excerpts from all reading groups to inform students that at least one member from each group has the opportunity to shine in the spotlight. Such sharing, to a certain degree, can boost students' confidence.

The amount of EFL learners' off-topic discourse might reinforce the fears of teachers and thus discourage them from integrating peer reading into their classes. However, the students in this study fully participated in group discussions and were attentive to their peers as they met with their team. Their level of active involvement in the learning process over the whole class

period would be unattainable in the teacher-centered classroom, as argued by Alley (2005). During whole-class instruction, many students are indifferent to instructors' lectures and sometimes exhibit off-task behaviors such as sleeping or chatting with fellow classmates. Rather than forbidding students to chat during group work, teachers can give students written assignments such as reading logs and ask them to hand in the assignment before the class is dismissed. In the current study, reading logs served as learning aids to help keep students on task.

Last, the structural complexity presented in the materials should not be problematic for students. Learners cannot enjoy what they are reading if they are overwhelmed with difficult language. Even L1 readers might also have difficulties reading in their native language. For example, Chinese readers might have difficulties comprehending the classical Chinese texts. In like manner, the EFL learners in this study could not make any efferent analyses or develop reflective thoughts if they did not gain adequate comprehension. This suggests that EFL reading teachers need to provide materials matching the linguistic level of learners reading them. Teachers can utilize simplified texts to help students who have not had a good enough command of English to access original texts. Good simplification preserves the key features of a normal English text (Claridge, 2005), thereby bringing an authentic reading experience to students as original texts (Nation, 2001).

The present study adds to the growing knowledge base on peer-led story discussions in an EFL reading class by showing that students can comprehend beyond facts to practice critical thinking and get aesthetically involved in the text to develop reflective thoughts. Peer-led story discussions therefore can be a practical alternative to inspire students to think critically about the information they encounter and to reflect on issues significant to them.

Although the findings add substantially to our knowledge of how EFL learners read as a group during peer-led discussions of stories, this study does have a couple of inherent limitations. First, the collaborative reading process examined was of the group with the best discussion proficiency. How would

other groups have performed? Future research can extend this study by exploring how a middle-ability group and a low-ability group in terms of discussion proficiency co-construct their textual meaning. Second, simplified stories were selected to be the instructional materials for group discussions. Nevertheless, using original versions written for native speakers may result in different reading transactions. Original texts might allow the researcher to determine whether students go beyond the barrier of literal understanding to move toward aesthetic appreciation through participating in peer-led story discussions.

Finally, as this study was teacher-researcher-based, the teacher-researcher was heavily involved in collecting interview data, which might be potential sources of research biases. Although interview questions that might lead participants to act up to please the teacher-researcher were avoided, future studies can be conducted with an independent interviewer, also an experienced EFL reading teacher, to gather interview data to limit such biases.

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