



Literature-Circles-Based Cooperative Writing: From the Perceptions of Indonesian University EFL Learners with Writing Anxiety

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Introduction

The emphasis on the reading-writing connection in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is in accordance with the praxis of Cooperative Learning (CL) (Haiyan & Rilong, 2016), which stresses the role of learner-centered reading discussions as a means to promote constructive writing activities. However, literature in the EFL context also highlights that individual participation and accountability are not equally promoted due to the unclear division of learners' roles in accomplishing the group's writing tasks. Such an atmosphere might generate attention exclusiveness on the high-achievers and trigger more anxiety within their counterparts. Therefore, literature circles were employed to mediate the implementation of cooperative writing for learners with writing anxiety. This case study, part of a more extensive study, set out to explore learners' perspectives on literature-circles-based cooperative writing. Thirty second-year undergraduate learners at an Indonesia university were selected to participate based on questionnaire results about writing anxiety. Of these, half were then selected for in-depth interviews to obtain the learners' perceptions about literature-circles-based cooperative writing. The results of inductive thematic analysis, using six elements of cooperative learning as the analysis guideline, revealed that individual accountability and promotive interaction were the most frequently reoccurring elements. The learners also reported on the importance of assigning different roles within the group to the success in their cooperative writing process. Recommendations for future practice related to literature-circles-based cooperative writing are presented.

Literature Review

Writing Anxiety from an EFL Perspective

Writing anxiety is conceptualized by Jang and Choi (2014) as "a fear of the writing process that outweighs the projected gain from the ability to gain (p. 82)." This hinders the learners' potential to be successful in performing English writing from the very beginning of the reading-writing learning process.

Arnold (1999) identified six contributing factors to this process: low self-esteem, fear of taking risks or challenges, introverted personality, exclusive and competitive classroom atmosphere, negative peer evaluation, less interaction and group work. In other words, the learners' writing anxiety can be triggered by internal and external factors, which detract from their writing performances.

Cooperative Learning in Tertiary EFL Settings

In response, a socio-constructivist learning atmosphere can be applied to promote a counter-strategy to reduce the learners' writing anxiety. By definition, cooperative learning is a learning approach that organizes tasks within small groups, to maximize group as well as individual learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1998; Slavin, 1995), or a teaching strategy to facilitate learners' activities in a heterogeneous learning climate. It is employed to enhance learners' understanding of the lessons through interaction with one another, which results in a measurable product (Jones & Jones, 2008). Therefore, this study selected the six elements of CL as proposed by Ning (2011) as the analysis guideline, specifically; Positive interdependence, Individual accountability, Promotive interaction, Equal participation, Equal opportunity for success and Group processing. These elements intertwine to create the necessary requisites to lessen both internal and external factors of writing anxiety.

Cooperative learning does, however, have some drawbacks. Nihalani, Wilson, Thomas, and Robinson (2010) found that individualistic rather than the expected humanistic atmosphere will sometimes occur more. In other words, although different tasks are assigned to every learner in a group, the influence of higher-achievers over lower-achievers still inevitably exists. Task divisions often do not have any follow-up rules about how each group member participates leading to a decrease in willingness among the lower-achiever learners to participate in and contribute to the group.

Literature Circles in EFL Settings

As a teaching method embracing the principles of cooperative learning, literature circles are a promising method but have not been intensively explored in EFL university-level context. Literature circles were first introduced by Harvey Daniels (2002) as small, temporary reading clubs, whose nature goes beyond just an extensive reading club. Every single learner has a different responsibility through specific roles. Each learners' specific job comes with an explicit role sheet such as discussion director to lead the discussion flow, summarizer to inform the final points of the reading text and the group discussion, vocabulary enricher to highlight some important vocabularies to understand the reading. It is these specific jobs via the role sheet which become the guidance in accomplishing the task (Daniels, 2002; Furr, 2004; Moreira, 2010). The activity is followed by peer sharing and constructive discussion. Figure 1 shows the cyclical procedure of the literature circles where two types of cycles are represented. The first cycle comprises all stages after reading a text (e.g., book or short story) and the second cycle comprises the present and evaluate stages.

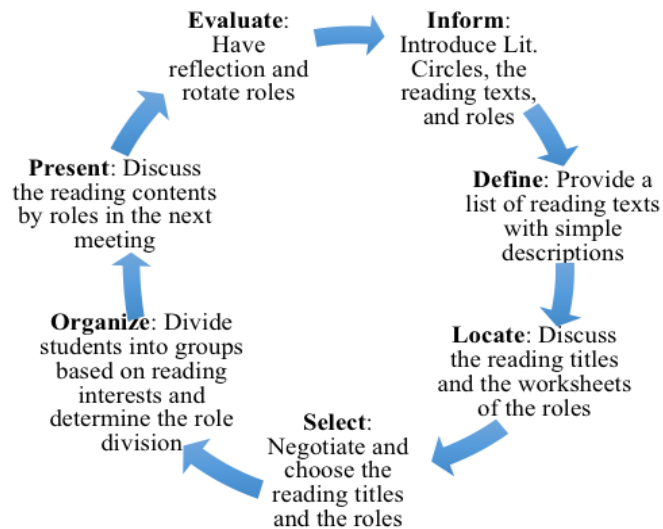


Figure 1. The cyclical process of literature-circles-based cooperative writing adapted from Dawson & FitzGerald (1999).

There are several advantages of implementing literature circles in EFL classroom settings. Literature circles have shown to empower learners' reading comprehension and equal participation (Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Furr, 2004). Learners can gain genre knowledge from role sheets and role-based discussions (Widodo, 2016) and improve soft skills such as learner autonomy and teamwork skills (Azmi, 2013; Widodo, 2016). Additionally, they can develop cultural awareness (Moecharam & Sari, 2014) and writing creativity (Lubis, 2018). The learning atmosphere of literature circles advances literacy development (Coffey, 2012, p. 396) because the learners in-turn take on specific responsibilities, discuss reading content, and cooperatively share different perspectives (Widodo, 2016). In other words, literature circles can decrease learners' anxiety (Carrison & Ernst-Slavit, 2005) to participate in the writing process and contribute to the group's success.

However, the exploration of the role of literature circles in mediating the process of cooperative writing among EFL learners with writing anxiety is rare within the literature. Hence, this study aims to examine the implementation of literature circles with Indonesian EFL learners. The question guides this study, "How do the EFL learners with writing anxiety perceive literature circles in their cooperative writing process?"

Method

Participants

This study employed a case study of qualitative design (Creswell, 2012). Thirty second-year university learners majoring in English education in Indonesia were selected. The learners studied writing in the first year and a preliminary study indicated the occurrence of writing anxiety among these university learners. Learners' names presented here are pseudonyms.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

A preliminary, 30-item close-ended questionnaire, was administered to identify learners with writing anxiety. The questionnaire was adapted from Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), Cheng (2004), and

Alrabai (2014) and consisted of two parts: Part A addressed the general learning atmosphere during the learning process and Part B addressed writing competency of the learners, see Table 1.

TABLE 1
Questionnaire Items and the Scoring System

Section	Types of statement	Number of items	Scoring system
Part A (Learning atmosphere)	Positive	4	Positive statements
	Negative	8	Strongly agree = 1
Part B (Writing competency)	Positive	6	Strongly disagree = 4
	Negative	12	Negative statements reversed scores

The questionnaire was found to be reliable with a Cronbach alpha of 0.96. Table 2 displays the results for part A & B of the questionnaire. Lower scores indicate less anxiety. The results showed that the learning atmosphere and writing competency of learners generally influenced writing anxiety. Fifteen learners were then selected for the follow-up interview because they demonstrated higher levels of writing anxiety than the other learners.

TABLE 2
The Results of Data Reliability Test Using Cronbach alpha

Section	Types of statement	Sample Mean	Follow-up mean
Part A	Positive	2.25	2.78
	Negative	2.70	3.09
Part B	Positive	2.35	2.83
	Negative	2.73	3.06

A semi-structured group interview was conducted to obtain the learners' perceptions after the implementation of literature-circles-based cooperative writing. The interview protocol consists of two parts with ten (10) questions formulated by the researchers. Part A consists of four (4) questions to obtain personal information of the learners. Part B consists of six (6) questions to obtain the learners' general impressions on the process of literature-circles-based cooperative writing, the way the learning method mediated their reading-writing performances, and their self-satisfaction with their performances in the reading circle.

Data Analysis Procedure

The interview transcript was checked, transcribed, and translated into English. By using an inductive thematic coding approach, the data was coded verbatim related to the literature-circles-based cooperative writing process. The initial coding process resulted in 147 codes. After the initial coding and categorization process, all codes along with the transcripts, were cross-checked again by the participants to ensure data reliability. The existing codes were then classified into broader categories based on the above six elements of cooperative learning to address the research question.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows the number of occurrences of six elements of cooperative learning in the learners' responses from the follow-up interviews.

TABLE 3
Occurrence Rate of the Six Elements of Cooperative Learning

Elements	Occurrence
Positive interdependence	15
Individual accountability	22
Promotive interaction	26
Equal participation	5
Equal opportunity for success	10
Group processing	22

Positive Interdependence

Positive interdependence was articulated fifteen (15) times in the students' responses after the implementation of literature-circles-based cooperative writing. Their responsibility to accomplish the role worksheet led to a more effective interdependence upon each other's learning because they thought that the group could not be successful if one role did not contribute.

Yes, there is because we are assigned a responsibility to take role, so we become more focus on and feel more satisfied on the writing. [Wieka, C1, Lines: 75-6]

Yes because I have my own roles to do the task, so it provides more guidance for me to contribute well. [Raisa & Febi, C3 Lines: 59-60]

It is relevant because it is like providing something that we cannot do becomes doable. [Dilla, C5, Lines: 73-4]

Learners reported that self-satisfaction triggered them to increase their contribution since the transparency of each role worksheet had been clearly stated, but flexibly modifiable. The clarity of each role's guidance encouraged the students' motivation to read and write better for the group. This conforms to the Samad, Aziz, and Abdullah's (2008) and Tamah's (2008) findings relating the nature of a structured teamwork environment whereby each student's role is considered contributing to the group's success. Their statements of feeling less competent in writing and worried about taking risks are countered by the encouragement of each student's conscious participation through the comprehensive and detailed procedure as part of their writing progress. This shows that literature circles can counter their writing anxiety in the preparation process through self and peer empowerment driven by specific jobs and role sheets.

Individual Accountability

The literature-circles-based cooperative writing resulted in a high number of learners' responses on individual accountability (22). First, the role sheets serve as a means of stimulating their capability to understand and accomplish the individual and group tasks because, again, the objective was explicitly set.

The point is there are more benefits now. So, we become more thorough. Yes, there is. We read it, and we convey the ideas independently. [Avi, C1, Lines: 62 & 78]

Avi reported that she became more thorough and independent in constructing her own writing through the assigned roles. She previously felt pressure to prepare very well for her language class. Contrastingly, her point of view from the interview highlighted her increased personal interest in autonomous meaning making. This corroborates Su and Wu (2016) in that the assigned roles within the framework of literature

circles can motivate EFL tertiary learners to be more responsible for the development of their own reading and writing repertoire.

In addition to the increase of thorough and independent investigation in the reading-writing process, some learners also benefited in terms of their creativity in re-formulating sentences.

We search for their definitions first. Then, we can put it in our writing. Also, we re-construct the sentences by using our own words. [Dilla, C5, Lines: 63-4&86]

Then, there is Summarizer, which encourages us to summarize by using our own words. Of course it is relevant. So, what we write is based on the results of our own experiences. The writing results become different. [Ana, C2, Lines: 49-50&56-7]

The excerpts exemplified that statements of feeling worried about using improper language and sentence patterns decreased. The findings contrast Furr's (2004) evidence that the learners tend to write the content copiously. In other words, their creative writing ability can be empowered, particularly by taking responsibility for the content of their roles.

Promotive Interaction

The most frequently cited learners' responses (26) further corroborated the positive impact obtained in promotive interaction from a more structured discussion flow in the literature circles. The manifestation of promotive interaction can enhance learners' writing organization skills because the discussion process involved many roles, each of which contributed to improvements in the writing process.

Of course it is relevant. So, what we write is based on the results of our own experiences. The writing results become different. [Sonia, C2, Lines: 56-7]

I [experienced it on] my coherence and unity. So, it is like the relationship; the flowing. [Wieka, C1, Lines: 71-2]

There is. The writing becomes more detailed. Also, I know the sequence. Yes, the same. I know the sequence. [Wulan, Febi, Raisa, Wiwit, and Shella, C3, Lines: 50-1]

The learners reported that they became more comfortable in discussing their work with other circle members resulting in easier ways to construct sentences. This contradicts the negative statements that peer interaction was not an enjoyable experience because of difficulties in organizing ideas.

Vocabulary enrichment was also considered as another benefit from the structured promotive interaction in each meeting. Learners' independent investigation stimulated it through Word Wizard role on not only seeking the unfamiliar words' meaning but also formulating new sentences from those words. Then, learners shared with other members during the group discussion.

The same because [my writing] can be more organized. Also, the language use can become better. [Nadia, C5, Lines: 71-2]

[I] know more about the stories' content. Besides, [I] know more about its meaning as well as the Word Wizard, the Scene Setter. [Avi, C1, Lines: 58-9]

Elhess and Egbert (2015) also assert that literature circles enhance students' comprehension strategies, i.e. visualizing, connecting, questioning, inferring, and analyzing the reading. Such a cyclical and continuous

interactive process encourages more awareness about language use (Azmi, 2013) necessary for the writing progress.

Equal Participation

In line with Ning (2011) the learners (5) suggested, the occurrence of positive interdependence and individual accountability will lead to the promotion of equal participation among the group members. Literature circles can be a catalyst for different types of learners to participate and contribute equally to the group's success.

For me, for example, in group, there are five students, but only one who works. In this [literature circles], all [students] were equally assigned, so the benefits are for all. [Darmaji, C1, Lines: 46-7]

Yes, I prefer this [literature circles] because in general reading discussions, there are only thoughts from some particular students, while the others do not work. Through this, everyone has their own role. [Hadi, C2, Lines: 38-40]

The participants of this study, Darmaji and Hadi for instance, reported that traditional cooperative learning still generated unequal portions of participation in a heterogeneous group, while literature-circles-based cooperative writing could eliminate such exclusive attention because every group member was assigned a specific role. Conversely, some research claims that individual accountability allows more opportunities for students to interact with their peers and more interactions (Nihalani et al, 2010; Astuti & Barratt, 2018). However, they clarify that such circumstances resulted from the teacher's demonstration and a preset procedure and so the absence of peer interaction at certain stages is no surprise due to the lack of an assigned role for each group member.

The occurrence of equal participation interestingly counters the majority of learners' frequent feelings of nervousness to volunteer in their language class. Literature circles provide an opportunity for lower-achiever or introvert learners to participate actively (Azmi, 2013). Similarly, Moecharam and Sari (2014) find that literature circles encourage every single learner to talk actively and eliminated any unnoticed opinions.

Equal Opportunity for Success

The findings also indicate that equal opportunity for success was emphasized in this literature-circles-based cooperative writing process (10). The combination of promotive interaction and equal participation motivates the learners to be active decision-makers and problem solvers. It results in a more collaborative way to promote one another's improvement.

The knowledge that we get is equally distributed. [Fia, C1, Line: 45]

... because there have been our own roles, and we help one another as well. [Wulan, Febi, Raisa, Wiwit, and Shella, C3, Lines: 45-7]

Yes, the same, it is influential. Previously, I do not really fond of grammar. Through teamworking, I can ask friends and have a sharing about how to construct sentences properly. [Hafsah, C5, Lines: 58-60]

Some learners notably reported that such teamwork helped improve grammar and obtain the knowledge equally because they respectively were assigned to all roles. Previously, many learners worried about the consequences of failing in their language class because they kept thinking the other students are superior

in terms of linguistic repertoire. Thus, the findings confirm learners' positive motivational growth from the awareness to empower each other's learning. Nihalani et al. (2010) saw a more in-depth student-centered discussion become a medium for learners to overcome group problems through peer feedback cooperatively. As a result, feelings of worry about getting left behind can be decreased simultaneously (Azmi, 2013). However, due to the absence of direct observation on the inter-group discussion in the classroom, a more detailed portrait of the process of overcoming the existing problems along with the peer-feedback process cannot be captured here.

Group Processing

As the result of individual accountability through role sheets, a pleasant group climate to effectively and efficiently achieve the primary purpose of the task, i.e. synopsis writing, could be naturally realized as represented in table 3 (22). First, the role division and role shift in each meeting after each chapter have been read and discussed which made the group process more organized.

The other [reading circles] urge us to read all parts, so the focus is really [difficult]. In this [literature circles], for example, we get specific parts [from the role], so the focus is on those parts only. Yes, in the common reading circles, we have to focus on all parts individually. [Sonia, C5, Lines: 42-4&46]

We become easier to write something. [Wulan, C3, Line: 45]

The learners reported that it became more comfortable for them to accomplish either individual or group task because everyone made a different yet equally contributing role with a clear responsibility. Second, the previous five elements let the students feel free to have an inquiry with the other circle members when they needed clarifications.

I can ask friends and have a sharing about how to construct sentences properly. [Hafsah, C5, Lines: 59-60]

So, we also get lessons from the roles. [Nadia, C5, Line: 84]

The opportunity to have peer-sharing lessened some learners worry about language mistakes and self-reflection became possible because of their experience in a role assigned to give or get feedback.

The findings indicate that organized group management provides an opportunity to lessen the learners' feelings of panic and worry about making mistakes when writing English composition under a time constraint because a bunch of simultaneous tasks does not burden them. In this sense, the results of the study confirm previous studies that self-reflection and role division trigger the learners to activate their critical thinking (Azmi, 2013) and dialogic inquiry (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Furr, 2004).

Conclusion

This study underscores that literature circles can be beneficial for EFL teachers and practitioners to lessen tertiary EFL students' writing anxiety within a cooperative writing process. First, the role division and role shift can become the bases for succeeding in the maintenance of the six elements of cooperative learning. It creates a dialogic while promotive interaction through role-based discussion followed by role-based writing, which can equally facilitate each student's writing progress. Second, the role division and role shift can also encourage learners to appreciate their individual accountability. Hence, some hindering

traits like negative self-perception, feeling of nervousness, worry, and fear of peers' negative judgment in the writing process can be lessened.

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