

## Using Literature Circles to Promote Reflective Writing Ability:

### A Perspective on the Co-operative Learning Approach<sup>1</sup>

การใช้วงวรรณกรรมในการพัฒนาความสามารถในการเขียน  
สะท้อนคิด: มุมมองจากแนวทางการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือกัน

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#### **Abstract**

The study was a classroom-based research project aimed at the investigation of the effects of using literature circles on the reflective components of writing found in students' assignments and exploration of students' views of the benefits of this activity. A framework by Pasternak and Rigoni (2015) was used to evaluate students' five reflective writings. It was found that across the five writing assignments, students' descriptive reflection and analytical reflection increased over the course of the class. As for hypothetical and critical reflection, there was no clear evidence of improvement partially due to the difficulty of the reading texts, students' background knowledge, and mini-lessons.

**Keywords:** Literature circle; Reflective writing; Co-operative learning

#### **บทคัดย่อ**

งานวิจัยหัวข้อ “การใช้วงวรรณกรรมในการพัฒนาความสามารถในการเขียนสะท้อนคิด: มุมมองจากแนวทางการเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือกัน” เป็นงานวิจัยในชั้นเรียน มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผลของการใช้วงวรรณกรรมในด้านองค์ประกอบของการเขียนสะท้อนคิดในชิ้นงานเขียนของผู้เรียน และศึกษามุมมองของผู้เรียนด้านประโยชน์จาก

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a study funded by Mae Fah Luang University

กิจกรรมวงวรรณกรรม งานวิจัยนี้ใช้กรอบความคิดของ Pasternak and Rigoni (2015) ในการประเมินงานเขียนสะท้อนคิดของผู้เรียนแต่ละคนจำนวน 5 ชิ้น ผลปรากฏว่าระดับการเขียนพรรณนาสะท้อนคิด (Descriptive Reflection) และการเขียนวิเคราะห์สะท้อนคิด (Analytical Reflection) เพิ่มขึ้นตลอดการเขียนทั้ง 5 ชิ้นงาน ส่วนการเขียนสมมุติฐานสะท้อนคิด (Hypothetical Reflection) และการเขียนวิพากษ์สะท้อนคิด (Critical Reflection) ไม่ปรากฏผลของการพัฒนาอย่างชัดเจน ซึ่งส่วนหนึ่งมีผลมาจากระดับความยากของบทอ่าน ความรู้พื้นฐานของผู้เรียน และบทเรียนประกอบการใช้กิจกรรมวงวรรณกรรม

**คำสำคัญ:** วงวรรณกรรม การเขียนสะท้อนคิด การเรียนรู้แบบร่วมมือกัน

## **Introduction**

### **1. Rationale**

Just like other subjects, literature is most likely to be meaningful to learners when they are truly involved and actively participating in their learning. Successful students are also encouraged to know how they have learned, what they still find difficult to understand, and most importantly, how they can apply and make connections between learning materials and other contexts. Dewey (1933) said “we do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience” (p. 78). Monyanont (2014) stated that as students learn they should be able to reflect on their learning. This reflection is composed of “the abilities *to remember* past experiences, *to think* about learning experiences, and *to evaluate* reactions toward such experiences” (p. 292). In addition, Hatton and Smith (1995) argued that “Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached” (p. 34). In a literature classroom, one of the practical tools to measure students’ understanding of the text is through a reading response (a written response to a reading of a text). As students write their responses regarding the story, they are expected to not only report what happened in the story but also comment on other elements that show their reflective skills. The purpose of having reflective ability is that students learn

by themselves from their own experiences. However, with numerous limitations, some students may not have enough understanding of the text or may have limited perspectives towards certain genres of stories. These limitations challenge teachers to facilitate students by providing appropriate activities that broaden their knowledge and experience. The key term used to generally describe this facilitating process is co-operative learning.

A literature circle is an active learning activity in which students share their insights about a story they have read. The idea was derived from a kind of book club activity where people read and shared their ideas about the books they have completed. In this activity, people learn co-operatively and informally. In this context, individuals are free to select their reading. However, in a practical classroom setting, choices may be limited, but the concept of using small group discussions to promote co-operative learning is still applicable. The co-operative learning approach is implemented in literature circles to make every student learn equally and gain mutual benefits (Noe & Johnson, 1999). Traditional teacher-fronted classrooms are suitable for the majority of students and probably encourage competition rather than co-operation. However, some students may not be able to follow the high-paced learning of a traditional classroom. This is where co-operative learning comes in.

Previous research revealed that literature circles presented positive reading comprehension and attitudes towards the reading activity due to students' engagement, choices, and responsibilities (Daniels, 2006; King, 2001; Stien & Beed, 2004), all of which are the basic principles for co-operative learning. Moreover, Marchiando (2013) stated that a literature circle is an excellent activity that offers opportunities for a student-centered approach. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their roles and to be independent learners. This co-operative group activity empowers connections between specific roles leading to interaction and learning. The roles mentioned represent the real tasks

of effective readers. Mills and Jennings (2011) also believed that literature circles create community learning and natural conversation where people connect their reading with other things, such as stories or experiences. To sum up, a literature circle can be an activity that brings about learning by broadening students' perspectives, thus equipping them with enough ideas to write reading responses reflectively.

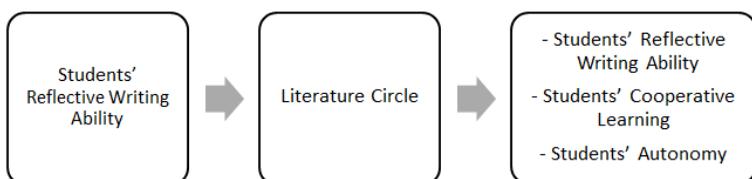
With the aim of improving students' reflective writing skills, this research investigated the effects of using literature circles on the reflective components of writing found in students' writing assignments and explored students' views towards the benefits of this activity.

## 2. Significance of Research

Firstly, the outcome of this research provides evidence of the effectiveness of literature circles as a learning tool. Specifically, it is anticipated that the results will demonstrate the influence and extent of literature circles on the improvement and enhancement of students' reflective writing. Furthermore, this study suggests an alternative method to approaches to traditional reading, especially literature. These approaches involve less individual accountability and co-operation.

## 3. Hypothesis

Writing reflectively on the reading of literature requires more than just a summary of the reading text. Literature teachers look for reflective writing in which the students go beyond the brief story. However, it is not always the case that students come up with different points of view about the reading texts by themselves. Literature circles can possibly enable students to be responsible in their group discussion and see the story from various angles. By so doing,



the current work hypothesizes that the literature circle improves students' ability to 1) produce reflective writing, 2) promote co-operative learning, and 3) enhance students' autonomy.

#### **4. Objectives**

This research aimed to:

1. investigate the impacts of the use of literature circles on reflective writing components found in each writing.
2. explore students' views toward the benefits that they gain by participating in the activity.

#### **5. Definitions of Specific Terms**

A **literature circle** is a class activity that involves self-preparation prior to the class, small group discussion, and whole class discussion. Students are active learners who have opportunities to identify discussion topics they found interesting in the story. The teacher acts as a facilitator who suggests other possible interpretations, gives further background, and summarizes the discussion.

**Reflective writing** is a reading response towards each reading text in the Literature 2 course.

**Co-operative learning** is “group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially-structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Olsen & Kagan, 1992, p. 8).”

#### **Methodology**

##### **1. Participants**

Fifty-nine third year English major students enrolled in the Literature 2 Course in the first semester of the academic year 2013 were the participants in this research. Each participant was required to write five reflective writings in response to five reading stories.

## **2. Learning and teaching processes: The literature circles**

Students were required to prepare for the class by reading a passage and making a reading log for their small group and class discussions. Secondly, students were responsible for certain roles, such as leader, time-keeper, recorder, and presenter. Next, after the students finished their small group discussion, the presenter summarized their discussion to the whole class. At this stage the other groups participated in any issue under discussion. The discussion was completed in two rounds. The first round involved the general information about the reading text, for example, characters, setting, and plot structure. The second round was an in-depth discussion into the theme and cultural issues presented in the reading text. The role of the teacher was minimized in the small group discussion stage, and increased to be a facilitator when some important points were missed or needed clarification. The teacher provided a mini-lesson to wrap up central ideas and gave other important information regarding the story.

## **3. Research Tools**

### **3.1 Research Tools for Data Collection**

- *Reflective writings* were assigned to students for every reading text. The reflective writing assignment was a one paragraph reading response toward the story (no more than one page). The content and style of each reading response was open to students' creativity. The students were encouraged to write beyond the summary of the text and to use information they had previously learned from small group and class discussions.

- An *opened-end survey* was given to the students to explore their views about participating in the activity. The questions focused on students' preparation, participation, contribution, and comprehension.

### **3.2 Research Tools for Data Analysis**

- The *Reflective framework* adapted from Pasternak and Rigoni (2015) was used as criteria to analyze students' reflective ability, which was classified

into the various components, including descriptive writing, analytical reflection, hypothetical reflection, and critical reflection.

#### 4. Data Collection

Two hundred and ninety-five writings were collected for data analysis. Students had one week to write their assignments. Five readings were used to familiarize students with styles and themes in literature.

**Table 1** Reading List

Reading List	Author	Theme	Length (Words counts)
<b>The Gift of the Magi</b>	O. Henry	Love and sacrifice	2108
<b>There Will Come Soft rains</b>	Ray Bradbury	Drawbacks of technology	2121
<b>The Tell-Tale Heart</b>	Edgar Allan Poe	Horror	2144
<b>The Necklace</b>	Guy De Maupassant	Materialism	2924
<b>A Rose for Emily</b>	William Faulkner	Memory and the past	3689

In addition, an open-ended interview was randomly conducted with 15 students to explore their opinions toward the activity. The questions concerned their general perception of literature circles, their opinion about how the activity helped them learn Literature 2 and the strengths and weaknesses of the activity with an emphasis on students' preparation, participation, contribution, and comprehension.

#### 5. Data Analysis

A framework by Pasternak and Rigoni (2015) was used in the content analysis. Pasternak and Rigoni (2015) stated that the four elements of reflective writing do not occur in order. They are equally important for students to reflect their learning experience. However, students should be encouraged to write

beyond description. For the present research, characteristics of each reflective element were first simplified as the followings:

**Table 2** Types of Reflective Writing and Characteristics based on Pasternak and Rigoni (2015)

Types of Writing	Characteristics
<b>Descriptive writing (D)</b>	Summarize the story using own words Describe one's own feeling without providing evidence from the original text Keywords: This story is about... I think... I feel...In my opinion...
<b>Analytical reflection (A)</b>	Analyze how events happen the way they do Make a conclusion about the lesson learned Keywords: This story implies that... The theme of this story is... This happens because...
<b>Hypothetical reflection (H)</b>	Provide possibilities of alternative outcomes Hypothesize how events may turn out differently if some conditions change Keywords: If ....., then ... If I were a character, I would ...
<b>Critical reflection (C)</b>	Recognize the influence of the socio-cultural-political context of the story Criticize the story in terms of other influences Keywords: This happens due to the society of that time... This reflects the cultural values of the people...

Each sentence that students wrote in their reflective writing was marked according to the characteristic that each sentence presented.

## Results

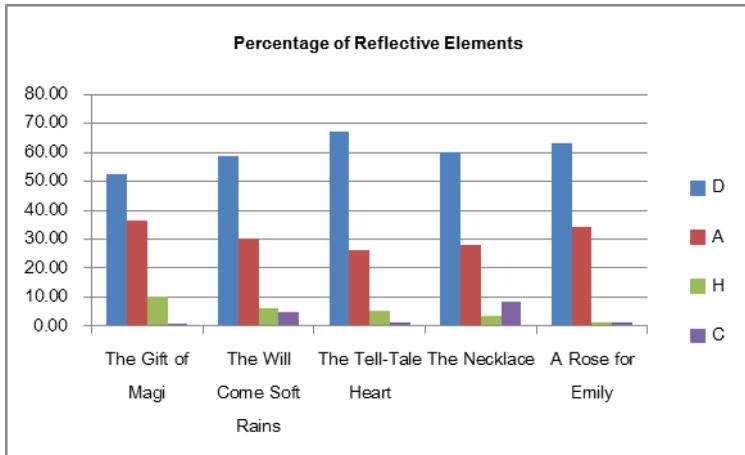
### 1. Reflective writing elements

Table 3 shows the result of the analysis of the 259 samples of reflective writing.

**Table 3** Sentence Count of Reflective Elements for Each Assignment

	<b>D</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>H</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>The Gift of the Magi</b>	222	155	44	3	424
<b>The Will Come Soft Rains</b>	294	151	31	23	499
<b>The Tell-Tale Heart</b>	358	141	28	7	534
<b>The Necklace</b>	380	177	23	52	632
<b>A Rose for Emily</b>	388	211	7	8	614
<b>Total</b>	1642	835	133	93	

There was an increase in the length of writings and the number of reflective elements. In the first assignment students produced 424 sentences and the numbers of sentences increased to 614 in the last assignment. However, the components varied from story to story. For all five assignments, students seemed to reach descriptive writing elements more than other elements. The story that students excelled in descriptively analyzing was “A Rose for Emily”, in which 388 sentences contained reflective descriptive elements. Concerning analytical reflection, the results showed that students were able to write more as the assignments proceeded. In the first writing assignment, students started with 155 sentences, increasing to 211 sentences by the end of data collection. Surprisingly, hypothetical reflection to the passages decreased over the course of the semester, from 44 sentences to 7 sentences. This element, along with critical reflection, did not show an increasing trend in the study.



**Figure 1** Percentage of Reflective Elements for Each Assignment

Figure 1 shows that descriptive reflection increased steadily by the fifth assignment. In regard to analytical reflection, there was a slight decrease in sentence numbers from assignment 1 to 3. Students were able to write more analytically in assignments 4 and 5.

### **Examples of students' work for each reflective writing element**

#### **Descriptive Reflections from 'A Rose for Emily'**

It can be seen that the greatest number of descriptive reflections were submitted for 'A Rose for Emily'. Many students, despite the story's jumps in timeline, were able to describe the story as well as their feelings for Miss Emily.

Examples<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Students' writings with corrections in the parentheses.

[Example 1] A Rose for Emily by William Faulkner tells the story of a lonely and sorrowful spinster, Emily Grierson and her journey from youth and beauty to pitiful and grievous death. The author explained that Miss Emily Grierson died, when the story began, but the author presented her in the first section made me think that she was just an unfortunate old lady, who got lost on her way and made some bad choices. Moreover, she did not leave her house, claimed that she did not have to pay taxes, and had once refused to dispose the body of her father.

In example 1, the student summarized the story using his/her own words and also describing his/her own feelings towards the story (..the first section made me think). Example 1 was marked as 3 sentences of descriptive reflection.

#### Analytical Reflections from 'A Rose for Emily'

The story that students found the most success with in regard to the analytical element was also 'A Rose for Emily'. Students were able to specify and judge the story's themes of memory and the past with valid evidence that supported their arguments.

[Example 2] Miss Emily, on the other hand, is more secretive and has more hidden thoughts throughout the story. For example, in one part of the story, the townspeople begin to detect some type of bad odor coming from Miss Emily's house. Miss Emily entire life was spent with her father, who was the one who pushed away most of the important men in Emily's life. Her father recently passed away and Emily did not want to let go and accept her father's death. This shows Miss Emily's personality and life and why she is the way she is.

In example 2, the student analyzed the character's characteristics (Miss Emily is more secretive) and provided reasons for Emily's behavior (Miss Emily

entire life was spent with her father...Emily did not want to let go and accept her father's death). Example 2 was marked as 5 sentences of analytical reflection.

#### Hypothetical Reflections from 'The Gift of the Magi'

Similarly, concerning a story that was close to their background knowledge and experience, students were able to imagine possible alternative outcomes if the conditions were changed.

Examples:

[Example 3] If I were in Della's position, having money next to none and a dilemma on what I should choose as a once-in-a-year present, I'd invent something that couldn't be bought in general.

In example 3, the student provided possibilities of alternative outcomes if he/she were the character Della. This was counted as 1 sentence of hypothetical reflection.

#### Critical Reflection from 'The Necklace'

Based on the definition from the framework, in this component students were able to relate and recognize that the occurrences in the story were a result of external influences from the socio-political-historical context.

[Example 4] The lady represents a woman's life in that period. Women couldn't express her individuality to others including her family. Women were judged by their appearance only. In my opinion, women can show their individuality through many ways now, but the majority of them still stuck in the same attitude.

In example 4, the student recognized the influence of the cultural context of the story and he/she also criticized the story by comparison with the present situation.

## 2. Student Responses

Students shared their opinion towards literature circles as follows:

Preparation – Participation – Contribution – Comprehension

### Preparation

Without preparing a reading log (a short note that reminds student about their thoughts during independent reading) for the class, students felt that they could not join the class without making themselves ready for the small group and class discussions. Everyone in the group must try to contribute to the class. With each student holding this responsibility in their hands, students found that they could brainstorm better. However, some students felt that the presenter held the greatest responsibility of understanding the text. The following examples illustrate these points.

[Example 5] I found that our group members were dedicated to small group discussions, which made it possible for us to come to the mutual understanding of the text. Finally, it greatly helps when it's time for us to write a reading response.

[Example 6] It's great that we can learn different thoughts from other members. However, I found that sometimes those who are not responsible for being a presenter will not pay much attention to the story, which led to no real discussion.

### Participation, Contribution and Reading Comprehension

A majority of students agreed that this course required them to be more active in class participation. The different roles were rotated every week. It meant that they were responsible for a certain role every week. The following was extracted from the student survey:

[Example 7] I like it when I'm responsible for being a presenter. I found that the presentation shows the final outcome of our discussion. It should be informative and entertaining so that my audience will not get bored.

[Example 8] The Literature Circles really works in my opinion. It forces me to read before going to class, otherwise I would not have anything to share in class. When I don't understand something, I can ask my group and we then make a conclusion together, which I think is better than me reading by myself.

To conclude, students' opinions suggested that they found that literature circles helped them to learn more actively, independently, and co-operatively with minimal complaints that it may not work for everyone.

## **Discussion**

After the use of literature circles, students were able to increasingly write descriptive and analytical reflections possibly due to the following explanations.

### **Self-preparation**

Students prepared their reading logs as a note to remind themselves about the thoughts that came to their minds while they were reading independently. This preparation was essential prior to the group discussion as it provided a great opportunity for students to generate a basic understanding of the story, including any possible questions that may have come up and for which they could not find the answer themselves. Taking notes while reading resulted in cognitive variables such as attention and comprehension (Castelló & Monereo, 2005). Therefore, self-preparation is one of the key elements that leads to effective literature circle results.

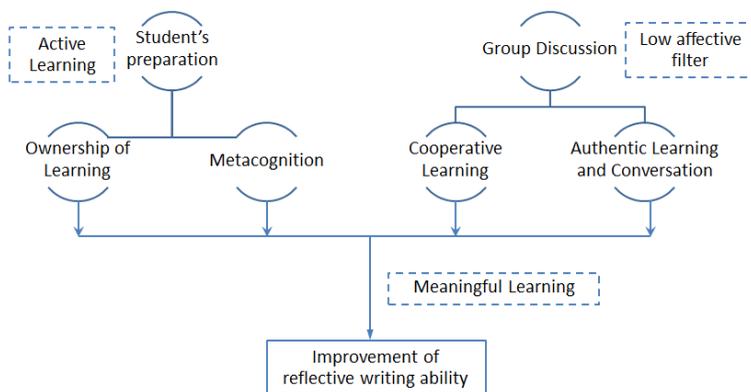
### **Group Discussion**

The dynamics of group discussion relied on the principle of co-operative learning. The literature circle is an effective method due to a structure that emphasizes the roles of each member and the creation of a social environment

that represents a real-life scenario (Whittingham, 2013). That is to say, everyone must have some responsibility and contribute to the group. Furthermore, during small group discussions students have their own choices of discussion topics, promoting the ownership of learning and going beyond the normal restrictions of the teacher. In addition, the discussion is meaningful as each member learns to listen to each other attentively, leading to natural conversation in which people connect things with other stories or experiences (Sanacore, 2013, Mills & Jennings, 2011). This also enables students to share ideas based on their common beliefs (Fredricks, 2012). Apart from sharing among group members, each group representative presents their groups' findings, and other groups benefit from the overall class discussion. The teacher facilitates in some points that need further explanation or asks questions that lead to multiple understandings of the story. In the end, the last process of the circle is for students to write a reading response that reflects what they have learned from both the small group discussion and the class discussion.

As suggested by Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011), literature circles are implemented to promote students' ability to criticize in terms of multicultural and political contexts. However, hypothetical and critical reflections failed to achieve improvements over the course of the study. This may be explained by types of discussion topics which may not have sufficiently encouraged students to think of alternative outcomes for the story (hypothetical reflection) or having inadequate mini-lessons to provide students with background knowledge for the story's context, such as history, society, or culture. On the other hand, descriptive and analytical reflections may associate with a lower level of cognitive ability which may be easier to manifest. According to Krathwohl (2002), the six categories in the cognitive domain in Bloom's taxonomy are remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create. That is to say, it is easier for students to describe (remember) and provide reasons (analyze) rather than think about other possible alternatives (evaluate) and criticize a story based on other influences (evaluate).

To sum up, the two elements imperative to the success of literature circles are students' preparation and group discussion. In the process of students' preparation, while taking notes for their reading logs, students actively do self-study which promotes the ownership of learning and metacognition. Then during class time, when students discuss among themselves they are free from the teachers' restrictions as well as the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class. This is known as having a 'low affective filter' (Krashen, 1985). In a small group discussion, students learn to share opinions and contribute by performing the roles that they are responsible for. This form of book-talk promotes authentic learning and discussion. By the end of the class, as students learn by themselves, prepare notes for discussion, and discuss in their group with some adequate guidance of the teacher, they gain enough knowledge to be able to write reading responses that demonstrate their reflective skills.



**Figure 2** Summary of How Literature Circle Engage Reflective Writing Ability

Figure 2 summarizes how the dynamic of literature circles engages reflective writing ability. Firstly, students have an active learning role as they start to read independently by preparing a reading log. This process promotes

ownership of learning where students freely choose arguments to note for the coming discussion. Furthermore, to select what should be noted, students apply their metacognition (monitoring own learning). Secondly, while the group discussion is processing, students feel more relaxed to talk with group members for they are free from a figure of authority. This enables them to learn better with minimized anxiety. Furthermore, the principles of co-operative learning, where students share ideas and encourage each other on learning, promotes authentic learning and conversation. Finally, the components of students' preparation and group discussion lead to meaningful learning. Students now understand the story better and are able to write more reflectively.

### **Conclusion**

The literature circle can be an effective activity to promote students' reflective writing ability. This is a clear goal of literature teachers aimed at promoting student learning and understanding beyond reading a simple summary of the main idea. The key elements that enable the literature circle to enhance students' writing are individual accountability and co-operation among each group's members. The emphasis on the students' roles in the classroom activity and the process of allowing students to be ready for the discussion, giving freedom of topics, and encouraging confidence to present different thoughts are all essential to complete the circle of this activity.

As for further study, it is intriguing to investigate what conditions optimize literature circles to enhance reflective writing ability or other literacy skills. This is particularly interesting for students who study literature courses in a Thai context. Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that the mechanics of literature circles, which rely on students' initiation, could be further explored in regard to other methods that may be used in combination with literature circles to encourage students to ask questions that are useful for small group discussion.

As educators' roles have shifted from being the center of knowledge to learning facilitators, we are expected to offer as many alternative learning

methods to serve diversified students as possible. Therefore, literature circles that prompt the use of co-operative learning are a great opportunity to develop students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as independent and self-exploring learners under appropriate and effective guidance.

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