

Josephian Reading Programme 2012

Boys talk: Learning a language for life

Abstract:

This research project investigated the effectiveness of using a Reading Circle framework which Saint Joseph's Institution (SJI) English Language teachers adapted to help in an introductory oral communication course to foreign users of the English Language. The focus was on using Reading Circle as a tool to generate discussion and share opinions based on the same story or article that they have read. This framework was based broadly on the collaborative approach, prior research done on how boys learn a language as well as the teachers' understanding of their students' abilities. Thus, this research offers an insight into how a reading programme can promote greater oral competency among foreign users of the English Language. Employing three boys-specific strategies such as crisp process, clear structure and oral performance, it aims to show how good practice and creative facilitation by teachers can encourage and inspire boys to improve their oral communication skills, and subsequently, gain enough confidence to lead in the facilitation.

Preamble:

This research came about as part of our involvement in Professional Learning Community¹ (PLC) in 2011. A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all. Guiding each team are the 3 Big Ideas and 4 Critical Questions of Student Learning. Through building a culture of collaboration that focuses on student outcomes, our research is driven by this big idea of how to ensure students learn. We focus on the learning of each student. Thus the relevant question is not "Was it taught?" but rather, "Was it learnt?". This shift of focus drives the work in our research.

¹ DuFour,R. (2004). What is a Professional Learning Community?, Educational Leadership,61, 8,6-11. The 3 Big Ideas of PLC are adapted from the works of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour and Robert Eaker.

To achieve this goal, our team worked collaboratively to explore the 4 Critical Questions of Student Learning:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they don't learn?
4. How will we respond when they already know it?

These questions enabled the team to clarify what each student must learn, consider how they can monitor each student's learning in a timely way and provide systematic interventions. These intervention strategies ensure students receive additional support for learning when they have difficulties.

Introduction:

Conversation is one of the components in the GCE 'O' level English Language Oral Examination 1128 (comprising 20% of the total marks) where students are required to express themselves in a conversation. They are assessed based on their facility in giving a personal response with substantiation, share ideas, express their opinions, and discuss relevant issues that arise with the Examiner. Summarily some of the pertinent skills required can be generalised into the broad categories of personal response, clarity of expression, as well as engagement through verbal and non-verbal cues.

Hence, students have to be equipped not only in verbal skills of self-expression and development of ideas, and applying appropriate tone suited to purpose, audience and context (new oral assessment), they also have to be equipped with non-verbal cues such as listening attentively to the question posed by the examiners, and establishing eye-contact to convey engagement and confidence. Naturally, these assessed skills are important, not merely for the purpose of an oral examination, but for the development of boys as effective communicators in their daily interactions with others.

In SJI, we have noticed that many ASEAN students (mainly scholars from Vietnam, China, and Indonesia) were not able to express themselves confidently during the Preliminary Oral Examinations. Over the past few years, based on our combined teaching experience in the

school, the EL teachers had also observed the following weaknesses in this current batch of Secondary Three ASEAN scholars in 2012:

- The responses are fairly simple with little development. Students may respond to the examiners' prompts in a limited manner, unable to sustain a conversation for long.
- Although they may possess the knowledge, they were not able to articulate their responses clearly. Their responses may be rather disorganized or disjointed. They may try to string their responses in short phrases.
- Most students require repeated prompts to sustain interaction with the examiners.
- Some of their accents may affect their pronunciation and articulation, as well as rhythm and tonality.

As these students are not natural users of the language, they are understandably apprehensive when required to share their responses with others. Furthermore, since it is not their default language of communication, they lack the practice required for them to acquire the fluency and confidence that the Oral Examination assesses them for. That convinced us that for our students to be more confident users of the language, they needed a structured but engaging and enjoyable approach to learning and speaking.

We have intentionally and explicitly designed our Reading Circle programme directed to what we believe is a distinctive boys' learning style. We strongly believe that by inculcating a love for reading, it will catalyze their learning of the English Language. This includes reading and speaking about the reading materials given to them. In our design, the students are involved in a structured lesson where they will read, reflect and discuss their ideas of a common text. Each text will require the students to respond to three questions:

1. Related to the story
2. Related to their experiences
3. Related to a social issue

Therefore, a group of teachers who are involved in the Reading Programme refined the Reading Circle framework to coach a group of 20 ASEAN scholars over 5 sessions from February to April. The Focussed Reading Circle Programme serves as a tool to help students to read and

reflect on questions pertaining to a common text and eventually, discuss their responses confidently with their peers.

Since the students in this research are weak foreign speakers of English, an investigation of the literature for our research focused on providing a structure in our reading classes for these learners.

Theories of Teaching Oral English

Functions of Spoken Language

Brown & Yule (1983a: 1-3; 1983b: 11-16)² mention that language can be seen as having two functions: transferring information (transactional function) and establishing/maintaining social relationships (interactional function). Interactional spoken language is characterised by shifts of topic and short turns. The accuracy and clarity of information is not of primary importance, and facts/views are not normally questioned or challenged. In transactional spoken language longer turns are the norm and there is a clear topic. Since the effective transference of information is the goal, interlocutors are actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning. Brown & Yule summarise the above stating that whereas interactional language is "listener oriented", transactional language is "message oriented".

With this in mind, the Focussed Reading Circle programme seeks to develop in our foreign students the skills of effectively transmitting information by engaging in discussion. The structure is designed in a way that enables boys to “extend themselves—mind, heart, interests, passion—into”³ the topics discussed. This “self-extension”⁴ makes the learning a “personal experience”⁵ for the boys. Through reflection and discussion, the boys are given the opportunities to develop their own thought processes and in the process formulate their own identity based on these issues. Some of these issues include parent-child relationship, gender stereotypes, and crime and punishment.

² Improvement of Speaking Ability through Interrelated Skills by Guoqiang Liao from School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan University of Science & Engineering

³ Michael Reichert & Richard Hawley (2009). Teaching Boys. A Global Study of Effective Practices. International Boys School Coalition. P. 155

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

Students are also “challenged to think beyond convention”⁶, especially for boys who are ready to go further. Sometimes the teacher plays the role of the devil’s advocate and asks questions that encourage the boys to contemplate on preconceived notions.

Discussion questions help students reflect on issues, relate to their personal experiences, and in turn, understand the story better, forming a dialectic relationship that benefits the boys.

In “Teaching Boys: A global study of effective practices by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley”, a US teacher, spoke of how empathy is a significant yet often neglected element of emotional intelligence:

‘Often boys receive less practice and have less experience in acknowledging the feelings of others, of understanding the world from someone else’s perspective. While they certainly retain this capacity, it is very helpful to give them the opportunity to “flex this muscle”. So much of success and ability to lead in the 21st century will be dependent on this aspect of their emotional intelligence.’

Hence, we saw a need to develop the emotional intelligence of boys in a manner which can also improve their oral competency. Students are encouraged to take on different perspectives as they discussed the reading material, exploring alternative points of view and speculating possibilities through abductive reasoning. Empathy skills are also developed as students learn how to think from their peers’ point of view when it differs from their own. By opening themselves up to varied perspective, they not only understand their peers better, they also gain a deeper understanding of the character or issue at hand.

⁶ ibid

Research Design

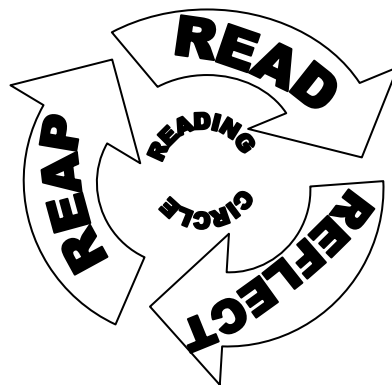
Procedure :Using The Reading Circle Framework

A Reading Circle⁷ is a group that meets to research and discuss particular problems or issues. The Reading Circle Model is a flexible approach where it allows students to share their responses in a non- judgemental environment. These include:

1. The teacher selects the text (story or articles).
2. Students read alone.
3. One week or some days later, students bring their notes or responses to class.
4. During the session, students will share their responses to the questions or issues. The teachers will jot down quick notes on their oral communication skills.
5. The feedback is given verbally or written using a basic rubric.
6. The students will read the next story or article in preparation for the next session.

In short, the approach can be summarized broadly in 3 categories: they read, reflect and reap new knowledge through the discussion. See Figure 1.

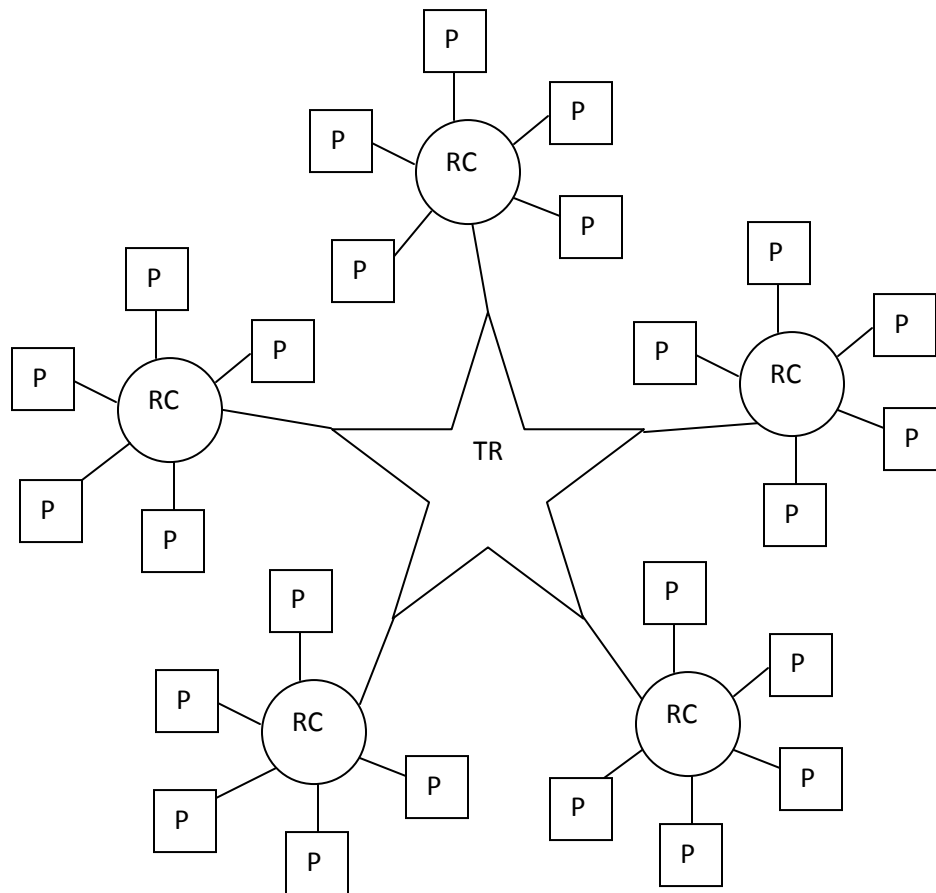
Figure 1: The Reading Circle approach



For a start, the students are grouped randomly based on their different nationalities into groups with about 4-5 members with a teacher as the Reading Facilitator. Figure 2 shows how the students and teachers are grouped during each session.

⁷ Taken from Professional Reading Circles: Towards a collaborative model for lifelong learning by Maryann Brown and Helen Hayes

Figure 2: The Reading Circle groupings



Legend:

TR- Main Teacher will provide overall direction for the session

RC- Teacher facilitator of each group will facilitate the discussion and offer feedback to the students

P- Students of each group will share views and comments

Based on the Reading Circle approach, we made use of the PLC framework to guide our research and set out our timeline (refer to Table 1 below). Carried out over a period of five months, the research started with the identification of a focus which was to get the Secondary Three scholars speak more confidently. Based on positive feedback from the pilot group of Vietnamese scholars in 2011, our team extended the Focussed Reading Circle programme to a

group of ASEAN scholars who come from China, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia in 2012.

Between 28 February and 18 May, we conducted 5 Focussed Reading Circle sessions. On the first session, they were introduced to the Reading Circle Programme and a pre-survey on their oral communication skills was conducted. Subsequently, during each session, the students will meet in a small group to discuss questions and issues related to an article that they have read earlier on. After the discussion, students will pen down their reflections or share their opinions with the whole group. This cycle repeats itself for 4 sessions. On the last session, after the discussion, a post-survey was conducted to gather feedback from students about the programme.

Table 1: Timeline of our research

Tasks	Actions to be taken
JANUARY	
<p>Reflect</p> <p>PLTs to discuss areas of concern or issues pertaining to student learning.</p>	<p>Stage 1: Identify a focus</p> <p>At this stage, the team discusses ways to improve the EL grades of overseas scholars. One of the areas of concern is their oral communication skills.</p> <p>SMART goal: Sec 3 scholars would be able to speak more confidently after undergoing 5 sessions of Reading Circle discussion.</p>
FEBRUARY	
<p>Plan- reflect- plan</p> <p>PLTs will devise strategies in their Action Plan to achieve the goal agreed upon.</p>	<p>Stage 2: Devise strategies</p> <p>Based on the positive feedback, the team is extending the Focussed Reading Circle Programme to a group of foreign learners of the English Language. They will investigate whether different groups of foreign learners will be more confident speakers of the English Language.</p>
Late FEBRUARY and MARCH - APRIL	
<p>Act</p>	<p>Stage 3: Implement the action plan</p> <p>The team meets the group of students to explain the Reading Circle</p>

Tasks	Actions to be taken
Observe and reflect	<p>Programme. The students will be given a short passage to read for one week.</p> <p>After a week, the team will meet the students to conduct the first reading circle discussion. 3 questions will be asked to facilitate the discussion. At the end of the discussion, the students will be given a new passage to be used at a later date.</p> <p>The team will conduct a total of 5 sessions. During each session, the students will evaluate their contribution to the discussion while the teachers will assess the quality of their discussion using the Oral Communication rubric.</p> <p>To enhance the validity of the research, the team will use both quantitative and qualitative data.</p>
Late APRIL- MAY	
Reflect	<p>Stage 4: Reflect on the strategies</p> <p>At this stage, the team compiles the findings and reports the action research. We will reflect on the strategies and implement a second round if required.</p>
Early MAY	
	<p>End of the research</p> <p>The team will make a presentation that highlights the processes and outcomes.</p>

The student sample

As the purpose of this research project was to help students who are weak in oral skills, we decided to provide them with more individualized attention in small groups and one-to-one coaching from an EL teacher.

Based on their nationality, these 22 students were put into 4 groups under the guidance and coaching of an English Language teacher respectively. The distribution of students is given in the table 2 below.

Table 2: Distribution of students

Allocation of students and their respective Reading Circle teacher				
	Name	Class	Nationality	Teacher
1	Owen Yunaputra Kosman	303	Indonesia	Mrs Mishaelle Chua
2	Vincent Rijanto Heru	303	Indonesia	
3	Nguyen Xuan Bach	304	Vietnam	
4	Yang Dichui	304	China	
5	Le Thien	305	Vietnam	
6	Clifford Ananda Surya	303	Indonesia	Mr Vinson Tan/ Mrs Chung Boon Siang
7	Nguyen Gia Huy	304	Vietnam	
8	Djunarto Ng	305	Indonesia	
9	Timothy Co Tan	304	The Philippines	
10	Hans Toby Limanto	305	Indonesia	
11	Hans Krisnata Muten	303	Indonesia	Ms Adeline Ng
12	Xu Jun	304	China	
13	Tran Hoang Minh	304	Vietnam	
14	Harvin Iriawan	305	Indonesia	
15	Nicolas Tarino	305	Indonesia	
16	Andree Hansen Wibowo	303	Indonesia	Mr Krison Tan
17	Wu Zhaoxuan	303	China	
18	Bui Thien Thanh	304	Vietnam	
19	Nguyen Dam Gia Bao	305	Vietnam	
20	Vincent Setiawan	305	Indonesia	

Big Idea #1: Ensuring students learn

What is it we expect students to learn?

Students use the prior knowledge that they attained through reading the given texts (refer to Table 3 below) to respond to relevant questions and issues.

Table 3: A list of short stories and guiding questions

Title	Author	Guiding questions
Sorry, wrong number	Lucille Fletcher	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are some important points one should take note of when speaking? 2. How can we express ourselves more effectively?
A devoted son	Anita Desai	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Was Varma being unreasonable when he rejected his son's advice and help? Why or why not? 2. Do you think Rakesh was a good son to

		his father? Why or why not? 3. What makes a 'devoted' son?
Cinderella Girl	Vivien Alcock	1. What do you understand by the word "stereotype"? 2. Do you think people around you tend to be stereotypical? 3. How has the writer made us aware of the meaning of relationships? Look from the angle of setting and characters.
Clean Sweep Ignatius	Jeffrey Archer	1. Does crime really pay? 2. Have you been punished before? 3. Can capital punishment deter crimes?

How will we know when they have learned it?

(a) Comparison of pre- and post- programme surveys

Discussion questions help students reflect on issues, relate to their personal experiences, and in turn, understand the story better, forming a dialectic relationship that benefits the boys. In fact, 66.7% of the students who went through the programme felt that the discussion questions helped them better understand the stories.

The post-programme survey reflects a unanimous sentiment that the discussions during Reading Circle were helpful in their understanding of the story. 92.3% of the boys feedback that one of the greatest benefits of the programme was to have the time to interact and exchange ideas with their peers about the story, and all of them felt that the group interaction helps them better understand and enjoy the stories. The boys also shared about how they felt culturally enriched as they shared their experiences with peers from different nationalities.

The enjoyment and interest factor is evident in their post-programme survey, where 83.3% indicates that they actually speak up more in class now, and almost all continue to affirm their enjoyment in sharing their opinions with the group. This proves that when these foreign users of the language gain the confidence, they do enjoy communicating their ideas and opinions. In fact, at least 4 of the boys actually indicated that they improved in their preparation for the discussion by reading the stories and preparing the responses beforehand.

Hence it is evident that the structure of Reading Circle allows for active engagement which facilitates and aids boys' effective learning. Boys develop their oral communication skills in an enjoyable and enriching setting, and these skills they acquire prove useful not only for their oral examinations, but also for their daily communication purposes.

(b) **Teacher evaluation:**

Teachers evaluate the students based on their ability to offer personal responses in a coherent manner using apt vocabulary and structures. Using Table 4, the teachers will evaluate the progress of each student during each discussion. Verbal and written feedback is given so that the students can improve in the next session.

Table 4: Teacher evaluation

▪ Personal Response			
Hardly any personal response or development	Simple personal responses, little development	Some personal responses to theme and some elaboration	Intelligent, personal response to theme
▪ Clarity of expression			
Ideas disconnected; single sentences, phrases or words	Ideas unclear, disjointed response; some apt vocabulary and structures	Ideas clear, coherent; mainly apt vocabulary and structures	Ideas well-developed; very clear, succinct, natural; very apt vocabulary and structures
▪ Engagement			
Requires repeated promptings, unable to sustain interaction	Depends on prompting and encouragement	Responds well to prompts but little initiative	Shares ideas, opinions; initiates discussion of relevant issues

(c) **Students' self-evaluation:** Students are also involved in self-evaluation of their discussion skills using a checklist.

Reflection also takes place every session when student fills in their contribution metre (refer to Table 5 below) and write their goals for next session. This end-of-session-reflection is important in creating self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in the area of oral communication. By setting their goal for the next session, the boys get to dictate their own learning focus, giving them a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. For these foreign users of the language, this structured and focused manner of learning helps build confidence as they set small, manageable goals that they can achieve. This generates greater interest and engagement as boys respond well when they are invested in their own learning. It is also the school's (Lasallian)

mission that the boys learn how to learn, to become a reflective and self-directed learner, a creative thinker and an effective communicator, driven by passion (engagement) and strives for meaning (clarification).

The contribution metre also develops the boys to be community-builders in terms of their engagement and contribution in the group discussion. Hence they have to be responsible in doing their preparatory work, in order to benefit from the session, as well as to benefit others. In the same vein as collaborative learning, reading circle allows for students to learn from one another⁸. During the discussions, students get to exercise and develop various verbal and non-verbal oral communication skills. Firstly, boys learn how to develop their personal response in a coherent manner; secondly, the boys learn to take the initiative to share their opinions and discuss relevant issues. When the boys require clarification, they learn to ask piggy-back questions, and to use the discussion as a platform to get their queries answered.

Table 5: Sample of the Contribution Metre students have to fill up at the end of every session:

Discussion skills	My contribution level		
	I am beginning	I am better at	I am very good at
I listen to what other participants say in my group.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I have a different point of view, I express it politely.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If someone disagrees with me, I listen and try to think it through from their point of view.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I use good eye contact- when someone asks a question, I look at them so they know I am interested in what they are saying and appreciate their contribution.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I ask a 'piggy-back' question when someone's question or response makes me want to learn more. (<i>Can you talk more about...?</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I answer questions with elaboration and explanation that I have read from the short stories or articles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

⁸ Michael Reichert & Richard Hawley (2009). Teaching Boys. A Global Study of Effective Practices. International Boys School Coalition. P. 184

I give personal opinions about issues when it is appropriate and back up my opinions with facts and examples.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I prepare for the discussion by reading the stories and preparing the responses beforehand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I make use of the discussion to help me get my queries answered.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My goals for improving my contribution in the next lesson:			

There are a significant proportion of students who showed improvement in various skills, as seen in the tabulation of the contribution metres (refer to table 6 below).

At least half of the respondents indicated an improvement in the skill of giving personal response with substantiation and elaboration, in the area of listening to others' point of view when it differs from their own, and using appropriate tone suited to an academic discussion in a small group sharing.

One-third of the respondents also indicated an improvement in their use of good eye contact during group discussion and sharing, in their elaboration skills, and in being an effective communicator as they would ask 'piggy-back' questions for clarification or make more use of the discussion to get their queries answered. This reflects an engagement in discussion through the process of clarification.

Table 6: Tabulation of students' contribution metres

Discussion Skills	Elaboration of Skills involved	Students who showed improvement (/12)
I listen to what other participants say in my group.	Non-verbal cues: Listening	ONE-SIXTH: (2 out of 12) 1 Indonesian 1 Vietnamese
If I have a different point of view, I express it politely.	Communication skills suited to purpose, audience and context: using appropriate tone suited to an academic discussion in a small group sharing	HALF: (6 out of 12) 2 Indonesian 2 China, 2 Vietnamese
If someone disagrees with	Empathy skills: perspective-taking	MORE THAN HALF

me, I listen and try to think it through from their point of view.		(7 out of 12) 3 Indonesian 1 China 3 Vietnamese
I use good eye contact-when someone asks a question, I look at them so they know I am interested in what they are saying and appreciate their contribution.	Non-verbal cues: establishing eye-contact	ONE-THIRD (4 out of 12) 1 Indonesian 1 China 2 Vietnamese
I ask a 'piggy-back' question when someone's question or response makes me want to learn more. (<i>Can you talk more about...?</i>)	Effective communication by seeking clarification	ONE-THIRD (4 out of 12) 1 Indonesian 1 China 2 Vietnamese
I answer questions with elaboration and explanation that I have read from the short stories or articles.	Personal response is developed and coherent; student willingly shares ideas, opinions and takes initiative to discuss relevant issues.	ONE-THIRD (4 out of 12) 1 Indonesian 2 China 1 Vietnamese
I give personal opinions about issues when it is appropriate and back up my opinions with facts and examples.	Personal response with elaboration/substantiation	HALF: (6 out of 12) 3 Indonesian 1 China 2 Vietnamese
I prepare for the discussion by reading the stories and preparing the responses beforehand.	Interest and enjoyment	ONE-THIRD (4 out of 12) 1 Indonesian 1 China 2 Vietnamese
I make use of the discussion to help me get my queries answered.	Discussion aids comprehension; reflects engagement in discussion through clarification	ONE-THIRD (4 out of 12) 1 China 3 Vietnamese

How will we respond when they don't learn?

Students are given verbal feedback in 3 main areas: Personal responses, Clarity of expression and Engagement. They can improve on their weaknesses in the next session. They are also given more wait-time to respond or share their ideas in each session.

Based on their performance during each session, teachers will think of ways to facilitate their learning. For example, when it was noticed that students tend to be haphazard and

disorganized in their responses, teachers introduced the PEE structure to guide students in structuring their responses.

P= State your main point first

E= Elaborate on the main point

E= Give an Example (if possible)

How will we respond when they already know it?

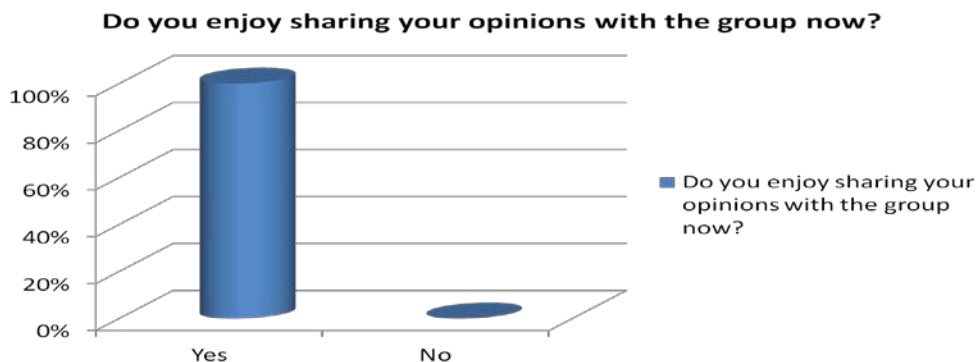
Students are encouraged to facilitate the discussion through asking questions and introducing new ideas to the discussion. Some even moved on to participate in classroom debates.

Results

At the end of the 5th session, a post-programme survey was conducted to gather feedback from the students. The results generally show that students become more confident in oral communication. In graph 7, an overwhelming majority of students indicate greater willingness to share their opinions within a group. They are more able to offer personal responses, express their ideas more clearly and respond well to questions or issues. The non-judgemental nature of Reading Circle has shed their inhibitions in using the foreign language and they have become more fluent communicators.

Graph 7: post-programme survey on whether students enjoy sharing their opinions with the group after the programme.

Post-prog



Reflections of students about their experiences

“The Reading Circle Programme provided me with a variety of stories to read which I usually don’t get in Vietnam. I find myself improving on both my reading and speaking skills. I also enjoy having quality talks with my friends and teachers. Instead of some mindless chatter, I am able to gain new knowledge when I interact with my peers. Being in a small group helps me to speak my mind freely and understand the issue through my friends’ opinions.”

--Nguyen Gia Huy, a Vietnamese student

“Sharing our opinions with others can help me understand what I am reading better. It also helps me to think about issues that I never thought of before. Today’s session was very enlightening on a personal note. I realized that the minute you think of giving up, we should also think of the reason why we held on for so long in the first place. Thus we should not give up, for as long as we try, there is always a way out. Overall, I felt that this programme has helped me to grow as a person.”

--Xu Jun, a Chinese student

“This is a very comprehensive way to encourage students to discuss issues. In our home country, we are encouraged to read but we do not have a platform like this to discuss based on a common story. I have learnt to express more opinions more fluently and to listen more actively to others. Sometimes we tend to underestimate the opinions of others and render ours as superior. But this discussion has proven us wrong. I have realized my opinion is just a grain in a bucket of rice and the need to focus and listen is a challenge that I have learned.”

--Hans Toby Limanto, an Indonesian student

Reflections of teachers about their experiences

“Being a newcomer in the Reading Circle, I am very impressed with the level of participation and the zest displayed by the boys who were present. They come with a sense of purpose and are open-minded to discussions and listening to one another’s viewpoint in order to respond intelligently in Standard English.

I have certainly become a more experienced and hopefully more effective facilitator working with the boys from a myriad of backgrounds. My questioning skills are sharpened as I interacted with the boys eliciting answers, probing for details and sometimes getting them to see the complexities of the issue at hand. One of my most memorable experiences took place during one of the later sessions of Reading Circle. One of the quieter boys from China who had not displayed much confidence in speaking so far actually took the initiative to get the conversation going when a challenging question was posed to the group. Not only was he able to express his view, he also related his personal experience as an extension to the topic. From this, I can see that Reading Circle is a good platform for the scholars as it helps shed their inhibitions of speaking English.”

--Mrs Chung Boon Siang, a first-time facilitator in the Focussed Reading Circle Programme

“The reading materials which include short story and play were adequately varied and thus generated interest and keen responses from students. The different text types also contributed to the richness of the reading materials with topics that ranged from crime and punishment to racial discrimination, offering an enriched discussion platform.

As the size of the groups was small and contained, the participants were provided with sufficient time and opportunity to share their view. The scaffolding with the guided structure further provided confidence for participants to discuss the theme of the materials. The composition of the different international participants within a group also ensured that they did not lapse into their native tongue.”

--Mr Krison Tan, a first-time facilitator in the Focussed Reading Circle Programme

“My experience the second time allowed me to interact with scholars from not just Vietnam but also China, and Indonesia. The discussions were culturally enriching, especially when the boys shared about their different perspectives on topics like Gender Stereotypes, Father-Son relationship, or crime and punishment.

I saw how learning becomes enriching for boys when they are actively engaged in discussion. Being given the opportunity to air their views, express their personal opinions and argue for them allows students to learn more deeply and feel more interested in the subject. Furthermore, the questions they are required to reflect and share on train their comprehension as well as

analytical thinking. It also enables them to reflect on how the issues raised can be applied in their own lives. Lastly, the boys had opportunities to practice speaking in English and learning how to coherently and fluently articulate their thoughts and feelings, and seeing how they grow more confident and fluent over the sessions reaffirms the belief that the Reading Circle Programme truly helps the boys in their Oral Communication.

Personally, I find all the sessions were memorable because the discussions were lively and engaging. The students shared freely and openly their thoughts as well as their own experiences related to the topic. The final session had students sharing about examples of corruption in their country and how corruption exists in their own lives in small ways too. We managed to go into politics and how the government operates in different countries. In the time span of less than one hour, they could share about both personal and general topics.

My wish for the next cycle is to further engage the boys through a greater variety of text types to interest them. If time permits, we can organize more sessions that are regularly spaced out to trace their growth.”

--Ms Adeline Ng, a second-time facilitator in the Focussed Reading Circle Programme

“Being involved in the Reading Programme and the Professional Learning Community has been an enriching learning experience for me. What started off as a Reading Programme for lower secondary boys has evolved into a customized Reading Circle Programme that has helped foreign users improve their English Language. As I facilitate and listen to their sharing, I am humbled by the layers of critical thinking that they bring into the discussions. I am happy to see that such a platform has broken down their inhibitions and they are freely sharing their views. Moreover, riding on the Professional Learning Community platform has allowed me to learn with my colleagues. During our intra- department meetings, I can hear what teachers from other departments are doing and seek new ways of sharpening my methodology. ”

--Ms Mishaelle Chua, team leader of the Reading Circle Programme

Conclusion:

In this era of Facebook and Twitter, face-to-face communication has been put aside indefinitely. We are losing human interactions and contact with each other. The rich experience we get from communicating with each other face-to-face will be lost if we do not make a conscious effort to retain it. Thus the reading circle sessions can become an interchange where ideas and opinions are exchanged. It allows the participants the opportunity to share their points of view. In the long run, it is more than just a skill to be able to speak in a group, it is an asset to be able to communicate face-to-face in a future that is dominated by technology.

Thus we believe that this Reading Circle programme is a tool that can be used by educators who are teaching foreign users of the language to help improve their oral competency and build up their confidence level. More importantly, we are imparting a lifelong skill of communication to the young, especially boys, so that they can learn a language that they will use for their lives.

Credits:

EL Department (Reading Programme)

Mrs Mishaelle Chua, Ms Adeline Ng, Mr Krison Tan, Mrs Chung Boon Siang and Mr Vinson Tan
20 Secondary Three ASEAN Scholars of 2012

(special credits to Nicolas Tarino from Class 305 for stitching the video presentation together)

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