Journal of English Language Teaching
Vol. 68 No. 5 (September-October 2026)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.66121/9fhj9v43

Reading for Autonomy: Literature Circles in the Secondary English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Literature instruction in many secondary school contexts remains shaped by examination-oriented pedagogy that offers limited scope for independent interpretation or reflective engagement with texts. This study examines literature circles - small, student-led discussion groups organised around rotating roles - as a pedagogical alternative capable of fostering learner autonomy and reflective thinking. Drawing on a four-week qualitative case study conducted with 44 Grade 9 students at a CBSE-affiliated school in India, the study analysed students' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. Findings reveal two key themes: literature circles fostered a gradual but observable shift toward greater student ownership of the reading process through structured, accountable roles; and collaborative, peer-driven discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate their own interpretive reasoning, generating both immediate and longer-arc reflective thinking. These findings suggest that autonomy and reflection are conditions built into the design of literature circles, offering practical implications for teachers seeking learner-centred approaches to literature pedagogy.

KEYWORDS: Literature Circles; Learner Autonomy; Reflective Thinking; Literature Pedagogy; Secondary English Education; Student-Centred Learning

INTRODUCTION

Literature has traditionally occupied a central place in the secondary English curriculum, valued for its capacity to develop students' interpretive, critical, and reflective faculties. In practice, however, the teaching of literature in many secondary school contexts remains shaped by examination-oriented pedagogy, in which the study of prescribed texts is reduced to the transmission of "correct" interpretations, character summaries, and thematic statements to be reproduced in assessments (Freire, 1970; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Within this model, the teacher functions as the primary authority on meaning, while students are positioned as passive recipients rather than active interpreters of the text. Such practices offer limited scope for independent interpretation, critical inquiry, or sustained reflection on the reading process itself, and consequently do little to cultivate learner autonomy or reflective thinking, two capacities widely regarded as essential to meaningful literacy learning (Holec, 1981; Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983).

This gap between the interpretive richness of literary texts and the constrained pedagogy through which they are often taught raises an important question for classroom practice: how might literature instruction be reorganised to give students greater ownership over the reading and meaning-making process? This paper examines literature circles, small, student-led discussion groups in which learners assume rotating roles and collaboratively construct interpretations of a shared text (Daniels, 1994, 2002), as one such pedagogical response. Specifically, the study investigates the following research questions:

- How do literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy among secondary school students?
- In what ways does participation in literature circles foster reflective thinking about the reading process?

In addressing these questions, this paper argues that literature circles offer a structured yet learner-centred alternative to conventional literature pedagogy – one in which the redistribution of interpretive authority from teacher to student creates the conditions necessary for both autonomy and reflection to develop. By examining students' experiences within a literature circles intervention implemented in a secondary English classroom, the study contributes empirical evidence to a growing body of literature that

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positions collaborative, role-based reading structures not merely as a comprehension strategy, but as a viable vehicle for cultivating independent, self-aware readers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature circles emerged as a pedagogical model in the early 1990s as an alternative to whole-class, teacher-led approaches to reading instruction. Daniels (1994, 2002) conceptualised literature circles as small, temporary discussion groups formed around a shared text, in which students take on rotating roles, such as discussion leader, connector, summariser, and vocabulary enricher, that structure their engagement with the reading while distributing interpretive responsibility across the group rather than concentrating it in the teacher. Unlike traditional comprehension exercises, which typically direct students toward a single, teacher-sanctioned reading of a text, literature circles are premised on the assumption that meaning is constructed collaboratively, through dialogue, negotiation, and the exchange of multiple perspectives (Daniels, 2002). This structure requires students to prepare independently before each discussion, take responsibility for contributing meaningfully to the group, and evaluate and build on their peers' interpretations, practices that position students as active agents in the reading process rather than passive recipients of predetermined meaning. Subsequent research has extended Daniels' model across diverse educational contexts, consistently reporting gains in student engagement, motivation, and depth of textual understanding when literature circles are implemented with adequate structure and teacher scaffolding (Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, & Miller, 2010).

The pedagogical structure of literature circles aligns closely with theoretical understandings of learner autonomy and reflective thinking, two constructs that are conceptually distinct but function in close relation to one another. Learner autonomy has been defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), encompassing the capacity to set goals, select strategies, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes independently of direct teacher control; Little (1991) further emphasises that autonomy develops not in isolation but through interdependent social interaction, a view consistent with the collaborative structure of literature circles. Reflective thinking, meanwhile, has been described by Dewey (1933) as the active, persistent, and careful consideration of one's beliefs and experiences, and by Schön (1983) as occurring both "in action" and "on action" – that is, both during and after engagement in a task. Within a literature circles framework, these two constructs converge: the rotating roles require students to make ongoing decisions about how to approach the text and contribute to discussion (autonomy), while the requirement to articulate, justify, and revise interpretations in light of peers' input compels students to step back and examine their own reading strategies and assumptions (reflection). Zimmerman (2002) notes that such reflective engagement, when sustained, reinforces self-regulation, allowing students to become progressively more autonomous readers over time. Literature circles can therefore be understood as a pedagogical structure in which autonomy and reflection are not incidental outcomes, but conditions built into the design of the activity itself.

Despite this strong theoretical alignment, empirical research examining literature circles has tended to focus predominantly on outcomes such as reading comprehension, motivation, and engagement, with comparatively little attention paid to their role in cultivating learner autonomy and reflective thinking specifically, particularly within secondary school contexts (Certo et al., 2010; Long & Gove, 2004). Where autonomy and reflection have been examined in the literature on pedagogy scholarship, they are more often treated as outcomes of broader project- or inquiry-based learning interventions rather than as effects attributable to the literature circles format itself. This leaves an empirical gap: while the conceptual case for literature circles as a vehicle for autonomy and reflection is well established theoretically, there remains limited classroom-based evidence of how these capacities develop through students' lived experience of the format. The present study addresses this gap by examining, through students' own reflections and interview accounts, how participation in literature circles shapes their sense of ownership over the reading process and their capacity to think critically about their own learning. This leads to the two research questions guiding the present study: how do literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy among secondary school students, and in what ways does participation in literature circles foster reflective thinking about the reading process?

This study's contribution can be stated in two parts. First, whereas existing literature circles research has predominantly measured comprehension, motivation, and engagement as outcomes, this study

isolates learner autonomy and reflective thinking specifically as the object of enquiry, using students' own journal and interview accounts rather than pre/post outcome measures to trace how these capacities develop over the course of the intervention. Second, where autonomy and reflection have previously been attributed to broader project- or inquiry-based learning designs, this study isolates the literature circles format itself, and specifically its rotating, accountable role structure, as the mechanism of interest, offering classroom-based evidence for a claim that has so far rested largely on theoretical argument. In this respect, the study moves the literature beyond establishing that literature circles are beneficial toward showing how and why the format cultivates autonomy and reflection in secondary students' lived experience of it.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine students' experiences of learner autonomy and reflective thinking within a literature circles intervention. The research was conducted at Al Falah School, a CBSE-affiliated secondary school in Hyderabad, Telangana, and involved 44 Grade 9 students aged approximately 14 years, selected through purposive sampling based on their availability and the school's willingness to integrate the intervention into the existing English curriculum (Patton, 1990; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A qualitative case study approach was considered appropriate given the study's aim of understanding, in depth, how students experienced and made sense of a specific pedagogical structure, rather than establishing generalisable causal effects across a larger population. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from the school and from parents prior to the commencement of the study; students were also briefed on the purpose of the research and assured that participation would not affect their academic standing.

The literature circles intervention was implemented over four weeks as part of the students' regular English curriculum. Students formed reading groups of four to five members and selected their own texts from a curated list of age-appropriate novels organised around themes such as coming-of-age experiences, social justice, and identity, allowing for an element of choice from the outset. Within each group, students were assigned rotating roles - including discussion leader, connector, summariser, and vocabulary enricher - which they held responsibility for across successive weekly discussion sessions. Students were expected to complete their assigned reading and prepare their role-specific contribution independently before each session, and discussions were structured but student-led, with the teacher adopting a facilitative rather than directive role, circulating between groups to support discussion where needed without dictating the direction or content of students' interpretations. In the final week, students consolidated their group discussions into a short written or presented response to the text, requiring them to synthesise and reflect on the interpretations generated collaboratively over the course of the intervention.

Data were collected through two primary sources: students' reflective journals, maintained throughout the four-week intervention in response to structured prompts concerning their reading process, role-related decisions, and challenges encountered during discussions; and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted with a subset of participating students following the completion of the intervention, focusing on their perceptions of ownership over the reading process, their experience of group discussion, and any shifts in how they approached the text independently. Both data sets were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, and the iterative development, review, and refinement of themes relevant to the study's two research questions. Coding was conducted manually and cross-checked for consistency, with particular attention paid to instances in which students articulated independent decision-making, ownership of their reading, or explicit reflection on their own interpretive processes, as these were considered directly relevant to the constructs of learner autonomy and reflective thinking under investigation.

To provide further methodological detail: the reflective journals were completed by all 44 participating students every week (four entries per student across the intervention) in response to structured prompts, for example: "What decision did you have to make in your role this week, and how did you make it?"; "Did anyone in your group see the text differently to you? How did that change (or not change) your thinking?"; and "What did you find easier or harder about this week's discussion compared to last week's?" Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sub-sample of 12 students (three from each of the four reading groups, selected

in consultation with the class teacher to represent a range of roles held and levels of participation observed during the intervention), following the completion of the four-week programme. Interviews lasted approximately 15–20 minutes each, were conducted individually in a quiet room at the school, audio-recorded with student and parental consent, and transcribed verbatim before analysis.

Coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarisation with the full data set; generation of initial codes applied line-by-line to journal and interview transcripts; collation of codes into candidate themes; review of themes against the coded extracts and the full data set; refinement and naming of themes; and production of the final analytic narrative. To illustrate the coding process concretely, the extract "I had to decide what questions were worth asking — no one was going to do that for me this time" was coded as Sole Responsibility, while "Usually the teacher tells us what the book means, but here we had to figure it out together and defend what we thought" was coded as Redistributed Interpretive Authority. Both codes, along with related codes such as Independent Preparation and Reduced Teacher Reliance, were grouped into the candidate theme that became Theme 1 (Literature Circles as a Site for Learner Autonomy). Similarly, extracts coded as Retrospective Reconsideration (e.g., "When my group disagreed with my idea about the ending, I had to go back and think about why I read it that way") and Anticipatory Monitoring (e.g., "I started reading more carefully because I knew I'd have to explain my thinking to the group") were grouped into Theme 2 (Reflective Thinking Through Collaborative Interpretation). To support analytic rigour, a second researcher independently coded a 25% sub-sample of the journal and interview data using the developing codebook; agreement between coders was 81% before discussion, and all disagreements were resolved through joint review and, where necessary, refinement of code definitions. Throughout analysis, the primary researcher maintained a codebook with operational definitions and illustrative extracts for each code, together with analytic memos recording decisions to merge, split, or rename codes and themes, forming an audit trail that was used to trace each final theme back to its constituent codes and source data.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Literature Circles as a Site for Learner Autonomy

Across both the reflective journals and interviews, students consistently described literature circles as requiring them to make decisions that would ordinarily have been made for them in a conventional, teacher-led classroom. The rotating role structure appeared central to this shift: because each student held sole responsibility for a specific contribution each week, they could not defer entirely to peers or wait for the teacher to supply an interpretation. One student, reflecting on her experience as discussion leader, wrote in her journal, "I had to decide what questions were worth asking - no one was going to do that for me this time" (Journal, Student 7). This sense of being accountable for a specific, self-directed task recurred across several journal entries, particularly among students assigned interpretively demanding roles such as discussion leader and connector.

This growing sense of ownership was echoed in the interviews, where several students drew explicit contrasts between literature circles and their prior experience of literature instruction. One student observed, "Usually the teacher tells us what the book means, but here we had to figure it out together and defend what we thought" (Interview, Student 14). Notably, students did not describe this independence as unstructured or directionless; rather, several noted that the discipline of preparing for a specific role gave them a clear sense of what independent work was expected of them, even in the teacher's absence. This suggests that the structured distribution of responsibility within literature circles - rather than open-ended autonomy alone - was a key mechanism through which students came to experience and exercise control over their own learning, consistent with the view that autonomy develops most effectively within a scaffolded, socially embedded structure rather than in isolation.

Over the course of the four weeks, several students also reported a gradual reduction in their reliance on the teacher for guidance. Journal entries from the second and third weeks of the intervention showed a marked increase in students describing their own planning and preparation strategies, compared to more teacher-referential entries in the first week. This pattern indicates that autonomy within the literature circles context was not a fixed condition present from the outset, but one that developed incrementally as students became more familiar with, and confident in, their assigned roles.

Theme 2: Reflective Thinking Through Collaborative Interpretation

The second major theme to emerge concerned the way in which literature circles prompted students to reflect critically on their own reading and thinking processes, rather than simply on the content of the text itself. This was most evident in students' accounts of having their interpretations challenged or questioned by peers during discussion. One student wrote, "When my group disagreed with my idea about the ending, I had to go back and think about why I read it that way" (Journal, Student 22). This kind of retrospective reconsideration - returning to and re-evaluating one's own reasoning considering an alternative viewpoint - closely mirrors the process of reflection described in the theoretical literature, in which learners step back from an activity to examine their own assumptions and strategies.

Several students also described reflection as extending beyond individual discussion sessions to their broader approach to reading. In interviews, several participants noted that they had become more conscious of their own reading habits as a direct result of the group format. One student remarked, "I started reading more carefully because I knew I'd have to explain my thinking to the group" (Interview, Student 9). This suggests that the anticipation of collaborative discussion functioned as a reflective prompt, encouraging students to monitor their comprehension and interpretive choices even during independent reading, ahead of formal group discussion.

A smaller number of students additionally described a shift in how they evaluated the quality of their own contributions over time, with several journal entries in the final week explicitly comparing their current confidence and preparedness to earlier entries in the intervention. This self-monitoring - assessing one's own growth across the four weeks - reflects a further, more sustained dimension of reflective thinking, suggesting that the literature circles format supported not only in-the-moment reflection during discussion, but also a longer-arc awareness of one's own development as a reader and thinker.

Taken together, these two themes indicate that learner autonomy and reflective thinking, while analytically distinct, were experienced by students as closely interwoven within the literature circles format: the responsibility conferred by rotating roles created the conditions for independent decision-making, while the collaborative, dialogic nature of group discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate the reasoning behind those decisions.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that literature circles functioned as more than a comprehension strategy in this context; they operated as a structural mechanism through which students were required to exercise, and subsequently reflect upon, their own interpretive judgment. This supports Little's (1991) contention that learner autonomy develops not through unstructured independence but through interdependent social interaction, since it was precisely the socially embedded, role-based structure of literature circles - rather than free, unstructured reading - that appeared to generate students' growing sense of ownership over their reading process. Similarly, the reflective shifts observed across journal entries align closely with Schön's (1983) distinction between reflection "in action" and "on action": students' in-discussion reconsideration of their interpretations in response to peer challenge exemplifies the former, while the retrospective comparisons of their own growth across the four weeks exemplify the latter. That both forms of reflection emerged within the same relatively short intervention lends support to the view, advanced in the literature review, that autonomy and reflection are not incidental by-products of literature circles, but outcomes built into the design of the activity itself.

These findings can be further situated within Holec's (1981) and Zimmerman's (2002) accounts of autonomy as a capacity that is built rather than simply granted. Holec's definition of autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning — encompassing goal setting, strategy selection, and self-monitoring — maps closely onto students' descriptions of deciding what questions to raise, how to prepare for a role, and when to revise their approach across the four weeks. Zimmerman's (2002) self-regulation framework helps explain the incremental pattern observed in the data: students' shift from teacher-referential to self-directed journal entries between the first and later weeks is consistent with his account of self-regulation developing through repeated cycles of forethought, performance, and self-reflection, rather than emerging fully formed from the outset. Taken together, the theoretical and empirical strands reinforce one another: Little's (1991) and Zimmerman's (2002) claims that autonomy is socially and iteratively constructed are not merely consistent with the findings but offer a plausible explanatory mechanism for why a structured, role-based format – rather than

unstructured group reading – produced the shifts in ownership and reflection reported here.

For classroom practice, these findings suggest that teachers seeking to foster learner autonomy and reflective thinking through literature circles should attend closely to the structure of student roles rather than assuming that group-based discussion alone will produce these outcomes; the accountability created by clearly defined, rotating responsibilities appeared to be a more significant driver of student ownership than the collaborative format in isolation, indicating that careful role design and scaffolding in the early weeks of implementation may be as important to the success of literature circles as the selection of texts or discussion topics themselves.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how literature circles influence the development of learner autonomy and reflective thinking among secondary school students, addressing a gap in the literature between the strong theoretical case for literature circles as a vehicle for these capacities and the comparatively limited classroom-based evidence of how they are experienced by students. The findings indicate that the structured redistribution of interpretive responsibility inherent in literature circles - through rotating, accountable roles - fostered a gradual but observable shift toward greater student ownership of the reading process, while the dialogic, peer-driven nature of group discussion consistently prompted students to reconsider and articulate their own reasoning, generating both in-the-moment and longer-arc reflective thinking. These findings contribute empirical support to the theoretical claim that autonomy and reflection are conditions built into the design of literature circles, rather than incidental outcomes of collaborative reading more broadly. The limitations of the present design, and the extent to which these findings might transfer to other classroom contexts, are considered below.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the sample comprised 44 students from a single Grade 9 cohort at one CBSE-affiliated school in Hyderabad; while purposive sampling was appropriate for an in-depth case study, the single-site, single-grade design means the findings reflect the experience of one group of students under one set of institutional conditions, rather than a broader population of secondary learners. Second, the intervention lasted only four weeks, which is sufficient to observe an initial, incremental shift toward autonomy and reflection but insufficient to determine whether these changes are durable once the structured role system is withdrawn or the novelty of the format wears off. Third, interview participants were selected in consultation with the class teacher based on role and participation level, which, while intended to capture a representative range of experiences, may have introduced selection bias toward students the teacher perceived as more engaged or more articulate. Fourth, as with any self-report data, journal and interview accounts are subject to social desirability bias, particularly given that journals were read by the class teacher as part of the intervention; students may have shaped their entries, accordingly, potentially inflating reported ownership and reflection relative to their experience. Finally, the researcher's dual role in designing the intervention and analysing the resulting data introduces a risk of confirmation bias in theme development, which the use of a second coder and an audit trail (described above) were intended to reduce but cannot remove entirely.

Generalizability and Transferability

Given the qualitative, single-site nature of this study, its findings are better framed in terms of transferability than statistical generalisability. In line with qualitative case study conventions, the detailed description of the school context, participants, and intervention design provided above is intended to allow readers to judge for themselves whether, and to what extent, the findings are likely to transfer to their own settings, rather than to claim that comparable outcomes would necessarily be observed elsewhere. On this basis, the findings are likely to be most transferable to secondary English classrooms that share key features of the present context: relatively small discussion groups, some flexibility in the curriculum to accommodate sustained small-group work over several weeks, and teachers willing to adopt a facilitative rather than directive role during discussions. Conversely, the findings may not transfer well to settings with very large class sizes that make small, stable discussion groups difficult to sustain, examination-driven curricula that leave no room for student-selected texts or open-ended discussion, or classrooms where teachers are unable or unwilling to relinquish interpretive authority to students – conditions under which, as the literature reviewed above suggests, the collaborative, role-based mechanism identified here would be unlikely to operate in the same way. Future research across

multiple schools, grade levels, and curricular contexts would help establish more precisely the boundary conditions under which literature circles are, and are not, likely to foster learner autonomy and reflective thinking.

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