

Fostering Students' Critical Thinking Through Literature Circles in EFL Classrooms: A Contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 4

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Critical thinking is recognized as an essential 21st-century skill and a key component of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which promotes quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, however, fostering students' critical thinking remains challenging due to linguistic and pedagogical constraints. This study aimed to investigate how Literature Circles (LCs) facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills in an Indonesian EFL classroom. **Method:** The study employed a qualitative case study design conducted at a private senior high school in Sidoarjo, Indonesia. Twelve EFL students participated in the study. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, including students' worksheets, dialogue journals, and lesson plans. The collected data were analyzed through data reduction, categorization, and thematic interpretation. **Results:** The findings revealed that the implementation of LCs involved several contextual adaptations, including reading material selection, group formation, independent reading, and role-based tasks. The learning process facilitated six dimensions of critical thinking: interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. Through independent reading, collaborative discussions, and structured role tasks, students actively engaged in questioning, analyzing texts, connecting ideas to real-life contexts, and constructing evidence-based arguments. **Novelty:** The study extends previous literature by demonstrating how adapted Literature Circles can be effectively implemented in Indonesian secondary EFL classrooms to foster critical thinking skills. It also provides practical evidence of how role-based collaborative reading activities contribute to the achievement of SDG 4 by promoting higher-order thinking and student-centered learning.

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has become a crucial skill in the information age. The rapid development of information technology demands that people understand from various sources and think critically. People must be able to evaluate thoughts, ideas, or judgments critically with awareness, inventiveness, and refinement as required. (Mataniari et al., 2020). Critical thinking skills help people understand themselves better and function more effectively in their complex lives by valuing and considering others' opinions and viewpoints. They will be more objective, less emotional, and open-minded (Raj et al., 2022). Critical thinking is a highly valued skill and a pressing issue in education. Therefore, applying it to learning has gained widespread attention. As a fundamental skill, it should be included in the educational setting. (Ennis, 2018; Schleicher, 2018; Yuan et al., 2021, 2022). To develop the skills, they need to be reinforced and applied consistently throughout the learning process. (El Soufi & See, 2019). It is suggested that teaching be supervised. (Raj et al., 2022) and to evaluate the application regularly (El Soufi & See, 2019)

The importance of critical thinking is also reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4: Quality Education, which emphasizes ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning

opportunities for all. One of the key targets of SDG 4 is the development of relevant skills needed for the 21st century, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and lifelong learning competencies. In this regard, educational institutions are expected not only to enhance students' academic achievement but also to cultivate higher-order thinking skills that enable learners to evaluate information critically, make informed decisions, and actively participate in society. Therefore, identifying effective pedagogical approaches that foster critical thinking in EFL classrooms is essential for supporting the achievement of SDG 4 and preparing students to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and information-rich world.

The application of critical thinking techniques in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is facing challenges (Alhabsi et al., 2025; Allehyani, 2025; Liu et al., 2023; Lobo, 2013; Yuan et al., 2022). EFL students are expected to become proficient in the language and acquire academic abilities such as critical thinking (Liu et al., 2023; Yuan, 2023). On the other hand, they face difficulties such as limited vocabulary, unfamiliar words, and long sentence structures (Alhabsi et al., 2025; Allehyani, 2025). However, the EFL environment introduces specific complications that affect students' capacity for critical thinking, including linguistic constraints, cultural quirks, and diverse educational backgrounds (Mafulah et al., 2023; Yuan, 2023). In Indonesia, critical thinking is incorporated into the pedagogical environment. The teacher facilitates the student's critical thinking in the learning process. Nevertheless, many teachers and students struggle to apply critical thinking in education. (Mutohhari et al., 2021).

The problems in developing critical thinking in English Language Teaching in Indonesia are influenced by three major factors: teachers' and students' understanding of critical thinking, language proficiency, and the content of students' textbooks. (H. P. Ilyas, 2015; M. Ilyas et al., 2021; R. N. Indah & Kusuma, 2016; Solihati & Hikmat, 2018; Zainudin et al., 2019). According to Ilyas (2015), the success of integrating critical thinking depends on the teacher's understanding of critical thinking skills and ability to create and facilitate activities that develop students' critical thinking in the learning process. A study conducted by Defianty and Wilson (2020 and 2022) found that teachers lack a thorough understanding of critical thinking, which affects their teaching methods and assessment of students' critical thinking skills. Notably, only a small number of teachers recognized that their struggles in encouraging critical thinking could stem from their limited grasp of the concept. (Defianty & Wilson, 2020, 2022). Furthermore, it is not just teachers who face challenges; students also have a limited understanding of critical thinking. (Atayeva, 2019; Mbato, 2019; Zainudin et al., 2019). A study by Atayeva (2019) indicated that the critical thinking skills of Junior High School students remained unsatisfactory, with most only reaching low-order thinking skills. A limited understanding of how to identify assumptions, recognize fallacies, draw logical conclusions, identify arguments, and make judgments may affect students' performance in engaging in critical learning and in developing these skills. (Anggraeny & Khongput, 2022; Defianty & Wilson, 2022).

Critical thinking in the Indonesian curriculum is seen as an essential skill to teach. However, it lacks clear and effective instruction or guidance on how to put it into practice. (R. Indah, 2017; R. N. Indah & Kusuma, 2016). As a result, teachers require improved training and support to incorporate critical thinking effectively into their teaching. It involves creating innovative strategies to engage students and fostering a classroom environment that promotes critical thinking. A study by Zainudin et al. (2019) indicates that teachers need to

be creative in facilitating and developing students' language and critical thinking skills by providing higher-order thinking questions and fostering a critical classroom environment. Therefore, there is an urgent need to design a professional development program that equips teachers with a deeper understanding of critical thinking concepts and additional teaching strategies to help develop informed global citizens. (Anggraeny & Khongput, 2022; El Soufi & See, 2019).

The next obstacle to developing critical thinking is students' language proficiency. Inadequate language skills are believed to influence students' critical thinking (Anggraeny & Khongput, 2022; Defianty & Wilson, 2022). Students with limited vocabulary face challenges in using language to express their opinions critically (Zainudin et al., 2019). Strong language skills, both written and spoken, support students in analyzing, communicating ideas, arguments, and solving problems. It is also believed that the fewer students who can use language effectively for communication, the more difficult it becomes for them to develop critical thinking skills (R. N. Indah & Kusuma, 2016). However, in their research, Indah & Kusuma (2016) found that only a small number of students could present their arguments in well-organized English writing.

In addition, the problem in developing critical thinking in Indonesia is that the English textbooks lack the manifestation of critical thinking (H. P. Ilyas, 2015, 2016; Solihati & Hikmat, 2018). The English textbooks for senior high school in Indonesia do not include a variety of tasks that promote and encourage students' critical thinking. Since most teachers use textbooks as references in their teaching, students' critical thinking is rarely developed (Solihati & Hikmat, 2018). There is a need for more innovative teaching approaches, such as inquiry-based, project-based, and problem-based learning, that can improve critical thinking skills (Basri et al., 2019). These methods encourage active participation, creativity, and problem-solving, which are essential for developing critical thinking abilities.

Developing critical thinking as a significant educational outcome requires teaching methods that improve students' critical thinking skills and increase their motivation to apply them. (Bezanilla et al., 2019; Fredricks et al., 2016; Simango, 2023), and one of them is Literature Circles (Ma et al., 2023; Venegas, 2019). Literature Circles (LCs) as reading group discussions (Daniels, 2002a) or peer-led discussions facilitate students in collaborative learning to understand reading texts (Chisholm & Cook, 2021; Daniels, 2002b; Furr, 2004d; Lawson, 2021; Ma et al., 2023). Some activities that may include LCs are reading selection, community building, roles in LCs, independent reading, preparation for the discussion, sharing, and discussion.

Some studies revealed that the implementation of LCs can help students develop their comprehension and critical thinking through reading and discussion (Chen, 2020; Espinosa-ecallos et al., 2022; Lawson, 2021; Ma et al., 2023; Ouhiba, 2022; Venegas, 2019; Intriago-Palacios et al., 2024). In LCs, critical thinking is promoted by shifting from independent reading to group discussion. Students are facilitated in reading independently and understanding a chosen literary text. Moreover, they discuss and present their thoughts based on it and are subsequently asked to respond to one another's opinions. In that learning process, students also raise and discuss questions in depth, which helps to develop their higher-order thinking skills. Moreover, the extended tasks, such as written and creative responses in LCs, contribute to students' development of critical thinking and a deeper understanding of what they read.

Many studies have explored LCs. Based on previous studies, LCs have been well understood in ESL contexts and implemented in a few EFL reading classes. However, they remain underexplored in secondary schools, especially for fostering students' critical thinking and engagement through LCs. Therefore, this study presents a case study investigating how LCs foster critical thinking, particularly in the Indonesian context. It is believed that a critical learning environment at school can regularly and intensively nurture students' critical thinking. In this supportive environment, students actively learn together, over time and across space, to exercise and experiment. They share ideas, analyze others' ideas, argue, and negotiate differences. This way of learning helps students better understand and analyze the circumstances around them and the different perspectives they hold. For that purpose, the researcher formulated the research question: How do literature circles facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills in the learning process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature circles

Literature Circles (LCs), also known as reading circles and book clubs, are a reading group model developed by Daniels and colleagues. They are student-led reading discussion groups that facilitate students' collaborative construction of meaning through reading and discussion (Barone & Barone, 2019; Lawson, 2021; Ma et al., 2023; Venegas, 2019).

Some researchers have different opinions about LCs as a reading group. Tracey and Morrow (2017) state that LCs are suitable reading methods. It encompasses essential education concepts such as collaborative learning, independent reading, transactional theory, and student-centered learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). The second opinion agrees that LCs are applied as a technique to facilitate reading in learning (Karatay, 2017; Maher, 2015). The third opinion states that LCs are a collaborative learning strategy (Espinosa-cevallos et al., 2022; Lai, 2024). Among those opinions, this study applies LCs as a learning method to facilitate students' engagement in critical thinking learning activities.

In general, LCs have features considered important for successful implementation in an L1 language class that need to be adapted in an EFL class. (Bedel, 2016; Daniels, 2006; Furr, 2004a; Widodo, 2016). The features are: 1) choosing reading materials from different genres (e.g., books, articles, poems) and text types (e.g., narratives, procedures, discussions), 2) forming temporary groups of four or five based on book choice, 3) reading different books for each group, and 4) sharing understanding, ideas opinion, feelings, questions, connections, and judgments about books or text they have read with others and forming new groups in the next cycle. The activities lead them to make meaningful connections and inferences, conclude, and reflect on the text they have read. (Gregory, 2019). However, LCs are not consistently implemented as a significant feature. Some classroom adaptations may be applied based on the needs of the particular classroom to achieve maximum benefit. Especially in EFL classrooms, some adaptations are determined by the learner's proficiency level, interests, needs, and sociocultural background. (Daniels, 2002a; Furr, 2004b; Maher, 2015; Shelton-Strong, 2012). Nevertheless, this study focused on the first three of the four LC features presented above.

LCs apply a combination of intensive and extensive reading skills. Therefore, the texts used must be suitable for both. In LCs, students choose one of the appropriate reading materials to promote their reading fluency. The reading materials commonly provided to

students include fiction, non-fiction, picture books, and newspaper articles. (Daniels, 2002a; Daniels & Steineke, 2004).

In EFL classrooms, students need more assistance in selecting texts or reading materials that can serve as sources for group discussion. (Furr, 2004d). Because of the varied levels of students' language proficiency, the reading materials provided to students are at their level and aligned with their interests, needs, and curriculum. The teacher's involvement and guidance are important, especially in choosing appropriate reading materials for students and selecting those that promote reading fluency and meaningful discussion, without ignoring students' autonomy in selecting the title or genre, as this will increase their motivation. Thus, this study holds that teachers' roles are crucial in determining the appropriateness of students' reading materials. In the EFL classroom, the teacher must provide books appropriate to students' proficiency levels, interests, and needs. Furthermore, the teacher's guidance on book selection helps students choose the right one.

In LCs, reading groups are determined by student book selection rather than reading levels. (Daniels & Steineke, 2004). Meanwhile, since students' language abilities vary in EFL, group formation is based not only on the book choice but also on reading ability, grouping, assignments, or curriculum level. In conclusion, this idea in an EFL class implies that teachers must be attentive in helping students form groups, especially by considering their proficiency levels, so that potential obstacles such as communication barriers, discouragement, and unfinished tasks can be minimized.

In LCs, different groups read different books. But in the first implementation of LCs in the EFL classroom, it is also necessary for the teacher to limit the number of book choices or even assign students to read the same reading materials. By reading the same book, students get the same hook from the story, which helps them play a determining role and accomplish a task, and also helps them focus on the structure of LCs (Daniels, 2002b; Furr, 2007). This study believes that experience in the first implementation is important. Students need to understand how LCs work and their structures. By limiting book choices or even providing the same book to all groups, the teacher tries to focus students on the structure of LCs and to ensure a consistent experience for all students, so they have the same understanding of LCs' implementation.

In the first implementation of LCs, EFL students need to learn about LCs and be trained to understand the structures and conduct a series of LCs activities. Moreover, it is necessary to help students understand and play roles in LCs that are appropriately adapted to their proficiency level, interests, and needs (Daniels, 2002a; Furr, 2004c; Maher, 2015; Shelton-Strong, 2012). For that purpose, the EFL teacher needs to prepare a role sheet. Using the role sheet, students can read and consider the text from different viewpoints, such as summarizer, questioner, illustrator, connector, vocabulary enricher, and many others. Thus, in each role, readers are involved in thinking processes such as visualizing, questioning, summarizing, and illustrating.

The teacher can train students on how they are involved in LCs using fiction, non-fiction, post-its, response logs, or role sheets. In training, as recommended by Daniels (2002), teachers (1) explain how LCs are conducted; (2) present live or videotaped examples to show what they look like; (3) apply various approaches; (4) examine activities and experiences in the process of training as well as give feedback on them; (5) give continuous feedback on how students can enhance their understanding and skills through mini-lessons and training.

The students use their written notes to lead their reading and discussion in a group meeting. What the students have already written in their journals, logs, post-it notes, or role sheets in L1 and EFL helps them understand the text and can be a source for constructing questions and extending ideas for discussion. They can also be used to overcome communication barriers in discussion, especially in EFL, such as linguistic problems. (Kasim & Raisha, 2017; Solikhah, 2017; Thornbury, 2005), psychological barriers (Almalki, 2014; Ariyanti, 2016; M. Ilyas et al., 2021; Listyaningrum Arifin, 2017; Wrench, 2015), poor listening practices (Nushi & Orouji, 2020; Ulum, 2015), lack of interest in a subject (Bloome & Beauchemin, 2018; Chodkiewicz, 2016; Male, 2019), and an unmotivating atmosphere (Davies & Pearse, 2000).

Reading comprehension, critical reading, and critical thinking

Reading is not merely a receptive skill; it is also an active cognitive process with lasting effects on readers. Fountas & Pinnell (2006) state that reading is a process in which readers think about the text. There are two reading processes in EFL: a linguistic decoding process and a meaning-construction process, which involves saying and comprehending something. (W. Grabe & Stoller, 2013). In the decoding process, a reader recognizes and pronounces written language. Meanwhile, in the comprehension process, he or she reconstructs the author's message. In the process, the reader activates prior knowledge, makes connections between what they already know and new information, makes predictions about the message, monitors meaning, analyzes clues, and reflects after finishing reading. (Israel & Duffy, 2009). The level of interaction between the reader and the text in constructing meaning enhances the reader's comprehension. The more the reader interacts with the text, the better their comprehension becomes (Kintsch, 2018). A study conducted by Kandel (2025) shows that in constructing meaning, readers combine many factors such as prior knowledge, vocabulary, strategies, context, and features that affect the reading activity. (Kandel, 2025). Therefore, based on these views, this study believes that to improve students' reading comprehension, a teacher should facilitate students' engagement in meaningful critical reading activities that expose them to a variety of texts. (Allehyani, 2025).

There are three levels of reading comprehension: 1) literal, 2) inferential, and 3) critical. The literal level involves understanding information explicitly stated in the text (Sadoski, 2004). At this level, a reader interprets what is stated precisely in the text without adding personal interpretation. This study assumes that, since the literal level deals only with textually explicit material, it is categorized as a low-order thinking skill in Bloom's taxonomy and requires only the cognitive domain. Meanwhile, at the inferential level, a reader comprehends what is implied in the text. Sadoski (2004) emphasizes that comprehension is not only about retrieving information but also about constructing meaning, and inference plays a crucial role in this process. It is believed that at this level, a reader has reached a higher cognitive domain of remembering because, in understanding a text, a reader interprets and infers what the author's mind is. In Bloom's taxonomy, interpretation and inference are categorized as cognitive processes in the understanding domain. The last comprehension level is critical, which involves assessing and judging the value of what is read. This level involves cognitive domains such as appraisal, critique, and evaluation. Wallace (2003) states that at this critical level, the reading process involves logical critique and argument, as well as an ideological assumption. It is a process of metacognition, or the awareness of cognitive strategies, and metacritique. Lark (2017), in his research on critical

reading strategies in the advanced English classroom, describes that, in a conception of critical reading, a reader must initially analyze the content by identifying and interpreting textual features and information to construct meaning. Then, they develop an assumption based on the reading text and assess the validity of their arguments. Furthermore, in making inferences from what they have read, they connect the ideas in a text with other texts and their prior knowledge. They have read, they connect the ideas in a text with other text and their prior knowledge. (Larking, 2017).

Since critical reading involves a highly complex cognitive domain in comprehending text, critical reading may be perceived as closely related to critical thinking; in understanding information in a text, critical thinking and reading work hand in hand. (Kurland, 2000). As stated previously, in the reading process, a reader understands both the language and the information in the text. In comprehending the text, critical reading and thinking are important cognitive processes. To read critically, the reader needs to analyze and evaluate what they read and synthesize their own beliefs or ideas based on it. (Paul & Elder, 2020). In critical reading, a very high level of thinking involves interpreting and analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the text to understand its literal and implied meanings. (Suacillo et al., 2016; Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016). Furthermore, regarding thinking skills, Facione (2011) explains that as a cognitive skill, the core of critical thinking includes interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. (Facione, 2020). It aligns with the high-order thinking skills outlined in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Bloom Revised, which categorizes cognitive processes into six: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Moreover, Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) describe that each cognitive process contains sub-cognitive processes, as seen in Table 2.2

Thus, based on the explanation of critical reading and thinking skills above, it is believed that, in comprehending a text, the processes of critical reading and critical thinking are simultaneous rather than closely related. It means that, as an active process, reading requires a reader to be critical in discovering information and ideas within a text. By thinking critically, a reader does not merely understand the text types, receive all the information, and comprehend what is explicitly stated in the text. In a study by Mohammadi et al. (2023) and Zhang & Binti Mohd Rawian (2026), critical reading significantly enhances reading comprehension. Students comprehend the text by fostering critical thinking skills, self-management, and effective learning strategies. (Mohammadi et al., 2023; Zhang & Binti Mohd Rawian, 2026).

Some researchers have demonstrated a positive, well-established relationship among reading comprehension, critical reading, and critical thinking. (Dianti, 2015; Kohzadi et al., 2014). Using literary texts, Kohzadi H. et al. (2014) prove that teaching critical reading positively affects the development of EFL students' critical thinking. Meanwhile, in more detailed Research, Dianti (2015) finds that there are only two of three aspects of critical thinking: analyzing and evaluating, which contribute to each aspect of critical reading, such as decoding skills, identifying main ideas, cause and effect, the writer's purpose, and inference skills. From the two aspects of critical thinking, analyzing contributes to all aspects of critical reading, whereas evaluating contributes to only two aspects: identifying the writer's purpose and the details. In the study, readers engage in critical thinking during reading. By fostering critical thinking in critical reading, a reader can read beyond comprehension. (Abushihab, 2008), which is the aim of critical thinking.

Instead of viewing critical reading as a relationship, some researchers have found a significant correlation between critical thinking and reading comprehension. (Hosseini et al., 2012; Karimi & Veisi, 2016; Shirkhani & Fahim, 2011; Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016). A positive correlation between two skills can be established by examining how they interact and contribute to each other across the various aspects of those skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

Design

The main purpose of this study is to explore LCs practices that engage students in critical learning activities that promote the development of students' critical thinking. Regarding its purpose, the study explores a problem and develops a comprehensive understanding of a central phenomenon that is fostering critical thinking through LCs. Therefore, qualitative research is considered the most appropriate method to be applied. Specifically, the study was conducted with a case study method considering the objectives and nature of the following research procedures.

Participants

The present study was conducted at one Islamic boarding school in Sidoarjo. It is a growing senior high school that implements a national curriculum and adopts an international curriculum to empower students with 21st-century skills and to strengthen students' aqidah and religious education. To live in a global society, students are expected to have skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity, as well as mastering English. Consequently, the school is actively facilitating the development of these skills.

Twelve students of different genders, English proficiency levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds were selected as the participants for this study. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. All students participated in activities that helped them read, write, speak, and listen. They accomplished tasks and projects that encouraged them to engage on a more critical level. Moreover, during classroom activities, students work in a variety of ways: individually, in peer work, in smaller peer-led discussion groups, and in whole-class discussions. The learning experiences were created to strengthen the development of critical thinking through LCs.

Instrument

Three types of instruments were used to collect the data in this present study: field notes, interviews, and documentation (document analysis). More specifically, the field note was used during the observation of teaching and learning activities. Instead of the field note, a document analysis of the teacher's lesson plan was used to confirm and validate the findings. Interviews were conducted with the students, followed by document analysis of students' worksheets and dialogue journals. Table 1 summarizes the research question, the evidence, and the instruments associated.

Table 1. Summary of the research questions, evidence, and instruments

Research Question	Evidence	Instrument
How literature circles facilitate the development of students' critical thinking skills in the learning process	1. Literature circle activities follow the steps based on Daniels' Literature Circles (2002) and the adaptation of Literature circles in EFL by Furr (2010) 2. Kinds of critical skills practiced in the process of learning.	1. Field notes of teaching and learning observation 2. Document analysis of the teacher's lesson plan 3. Interview with students 4. Document analysis of Students' worksheets and dialogue journals

Data collection

The classroom observations were conducted during the effective days of the first semester. There were three observations in two months based on the teacher's lesson. The researcher observed the students' activities during the learning. The students learned English every two weeks. The researcher took field notes on how critical thinking is fostered through LCs during the learning process. The observations and field notes based on the observation guide were developed to identify and understand teaching and learning practices. The observation guide was designed to ensure that the data collection process with students as participants was focused and to prevent unnecessary variations. The results were written in field notes within 24 hours of the observations to ensure precision.

An interview with open-ended questions was conducted to gather data from the students, especially the LCs' teaching and learning practices, how critical thinking was fostered in LCs, and how they engaged students in critical learning. The interviews were conducted before and after teaching and learning. After the interviews, the researcher documented the notes of her interpretations of the participants' responses. For this study, all interviews were recorded on tape (with the participant's permission) and summarized in notes.

In addition to observation and interviews, the researcher collected documents such as the teaching plan, students' worksheets, dialogue journals, and students' works. The documents were useful for triangulating data on students' classroom activities in LCs that were used to support the exploration of critical thinking through LCs.

Data analysis

In the analysis process, the collected data were organized and reduced through summarizing and categorizing. Patterns and themes in the data were identified and linked. Next, the data from the lesson plan, students' work samples, students' dialogue journals, and the results of the interviews were analyzed to construct an understanding of students' engagement and development of critical thinking. In addition, field notes of the observations were analyzed to explore themes, patterns, and issues emerging from the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The literature circles activities that engage students in critical thinking

Reviewing the lesson plan, the observation field notes on teaching and learning activities, and the observation field notes of students' engagement, three main activities were implemented in LCs: group formation, independent reading, and discussion. The first

activity, group formation, was conducted in the first meeting under the teacher's guidance. Meanwhile, the independent reading was done after class. There were two activities in this activity: reading and doing role tasks. The last activity in the LCs was a discussion, in which the students presented and discussed their role tasks.

It was identified that, in groups, students interacted with the text by reading and answering some questions to build their knowledge. At the end of the learning phase, the students were divided into groups of six. Following the formation, six roles were distributed to students: discussion director, vocabulary enricher, illustrator, connector, text analyzer, and grammar pointer. Each role has a different task to do can see in Table 2.

Table 2. Role tasks in literature circles

Roles	Tasks
Director	a. composing some questions from the texts b. giving the questions to the members of the group c. leading the discussion
Vocabulary Enricher	a. identifying new/interesting/odd/bewildering/unfamiliar/ vocabularies b. finding the meaning based on the text or in a dictionary c. giving an example of sentences in the vocabulary d. presenting and discussing the words and sentences with the other students in a group discussion
Illustrator	a. drawing some kinds of pictures that represent the meaning of the reading text. It could be a sketch, a cartoon, a diagram, a flowchart, or a stick-figure scene. b. presenting and discussing the picture in a group discussion
Connector	a. Connecting text to text, life, happenings, events, news, problems, stories, and books. b. Explaining and discussing the connection in group discussion
Text Analyzer	a. Identifying and examining text structure and its social function. b. Explain and discuss the structure analysis with the group.
Grammar Pointer	a. Identifying and examining language features and the examples b. Explaining and discussing the analysis of the language features and examples

The students who served as discussion directors led the discussion and wrote questions from the texts to be shared in the group. To analyze the observation field notes on students' engagement, the questions were written for both low and high-order thinking as presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Some questions composed by the discussion directors

The first discussion director	The second discussion director
1. What did the word mean?	1. What does a word mean? Give an example!
2. How do you draw the illustration to be like that?	2. How do you relate the text to your life?
3. What were you wondering about while you were reading?	3. What is the author's purpose?
4. What is an important passage according to you? Why?	

The vocabulary enrichers identify new/interesting/odd/bewildering/ unfamiliar vocabulary, find the meaning in the text or in a dictionary, and give examples of sentences. In a group discussion, he or she explains and discusses the words and sentences with the other students. The vocabulary is presented in Table 4. The students who become vocabulary enrichers have not finished their task yet, so not all vocabulary is translated and given examples.

Table 4. The new/interesting/odd/bewildering/ unfamiliar vocabulary.

The First Vocabulary Enricher			The Second Vocabulary Enricher		
Vocabulary	Meaning & Example	Notes for Discussion	Vocabulary	Meaning	Notes for Discussion
Examine	My teacher examines student work	-	Pneumonia	The old man died because of pneumonia	-
Cause	Climate change causes some problems	Reason	Sizzling	It is sizzling today	Very hot
Shameful	Shameful	It is shameful	Sweltering	Today is sweltering	-
Sizzling	-	-			
Sweltering	Sweltering	-			

The connector relates the reading passage to the world, such as life, happenings, events, news, problems, stories, books, or writings on the same topic. Furthermore, she explains the connection and receives responses from others with different opinions in a group discussion. The student's opinion of the text and its relation with the life/happenings/events/news/problems/stories/books/writing is described in Table 4.9.

Based on the table, the students relate the text to their knowledge/experience/problem/event in their surroundings/country. The students use English and Indonesian to present their opinions because of their language proficiency (see Table 5).

Table 5. The connection of the text with the life/happenings/events/news/problems/stories/books/writing

The 1 st Connector	Other's Response	The 2 nd connector	Other's Response
According to my knowledge, extreme weather changes are very dangerous, for example extreme winter, for people who cannot stand the cold they will not be able to survive.	Likewise, extreme heat is also not good for humans, especially for skin health.	To address extreme climate change, the danger to human life is evident. In Indonesia, for example, the dry season is becoming longer than the rainy season. This is causing widespread drought.	I agree. The rainy season also causes flooding and landslides if rainfall is high.

The student who gets a role as an illustrator draws a picture that represents the meaning of the reading text. It can be a sketch, a cartoon, a diagram, a flowchart, or a stick-figure scene.

Next, in a group discussion, he or she shows and explains the picture to the group, letting others speculate and connect with their ideas. Related to the text whose title is “Weather Related-problem”, the student’s sketch is presented in Figure 1.

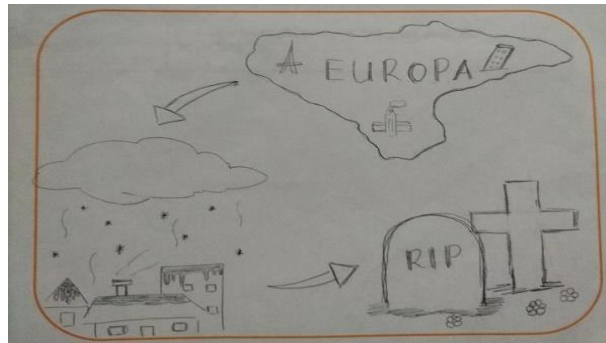


Figure 1. A sketch of a text: “Weather related-problem”

The approach used in teaching English is genre-based, in which students learn text structures, social functions, language features, and meaning. Therefore, two role tasks have been determined to accommodate the need and demand. The roles and tasks regarding the need and demand are a text analyzer and a grammar pointer. A text analyzer is a person who identifies and examines the structure of the text and its social function. Furthermore, in group discussions, he or she explains and discusses them with the group. The next role task is a grammar pointer. The student who gets the role task has a role in identifying and examining the language features of the text and then discussing them in a group discussion.

After the students are divided into groups of six, the teacher distributes a set of literature circles role sheets. Then they discuss them to learn more about the role and tasks. The purpose of the activity is to prepare the student for independent reading and learning. The next activity after group formation is independent reading, which consists of two activities: reading and role tasks. In this study, the teacher provides a reading text to accomplish the role tasks. Regarding the role tasks, the students do some activities, such as composing questions, interpreting meaning, inferring meaning, explaining their tasks, evaluating text, and analyzing text structure and language function. In the second meeting, the students join in group discussions in which they present and discuss their tasks based on their role and respond to their peers' presentations. At the end of the discussion, students are promoted to reflect and conclude the learning.

Based on the description of literature circle activities and role tasks, there are three main activities: group formation, independent reading, and discussion. The detailed activities for each main activity are grouping, selecting the reading text, reading individually, accomplishing role tasks, presenting the tasks, responding to others' opinions, and reflecting on learning. The students have to play roles and accomplish role tasks. The roles in the implementation are director, vocabulary enricher, illustrator, connector, text analyzer, and grammar pointer.

The critical thinking skills practiced in literature circles

Based on the analysis of the lesson plan (appendix O3), interview (appendix H, L, N, and O1), and observation (appendix O2), it can be identified that through the process of group formation, independent learning, and discussion, the student's critical thinking skills are facilitated to develop. Regarding the critical thinking skills practiced through literature

circles, during the interview, the students are asked about the kinds of learning activities they have (Appendix H, L, and O1). They answer as follows:

Student 1: *I marked, recorded, identified, interpreted, predicted, and explained* (Student 1, interview, November 16, 2020)

Student 2: *I marked, recorded, drew conclusions, described, and explained* (Student 2, interview, November 16, 2020)

Student 3: *I formulated questions, explained, and led discussions* (Student 3, interview, November 16, 2020)

Student 4: *I marked, recorded, identified, drew conclusions, related the text to life, and explained* (Student 4, interview, November 16, 2020)

Based on the interview, the activities that facilitate students' critical thinking skills include interpreting, inferring, predicting, explaining, illustrating, questioning, leading discussion, and connecting text to life. Moreover, the kinds of critical thinking skills facilitated in the learning are presented.

Based on the lesson plan and the observation analysis, interpretation is facilitated through learning activities such as clarifying meaning, asking questions, giving examples, and illustrating text through pictures/drawings/sketches/mapping/graphics/tables. Using indicators of critical thinking skills, it is identified that some roles facilitate students' development of interpretation skills. The examples are as follows: 1) the vocabulary enricher clarifies the meaning of new/interesting/odd/bewildering/unfamiliar vocabulary and gives examples of the vocabulary through a role task, 2) the discussion director poses questions the illustrator illustrates text through picture/drawing/sketch/mapping/graphic/table. The next skill is analysis, facilitated by analyzing text structure and language features. The two roles that analyze them are the text analyzer and the grammar pointer. Inference skill is developed by concluding information, ideas, and meaning based on the text. The connector and illustrator summarize the text before connecting it to life/story/book/event or drawing a picture/sketch/mapping/diagram to illustrate in Table 6.

Table 6. List of Critical thinking skills developed in literature circles

Critical Thinking Skills	Learning Activities	Role Tasks	Literature Circles Main Activities
Interpretation	● Clarify meaning ● Give examples ● Convey questions ● Illustrate text through pictures/drawings/sketches/mapping/graphics/table	● Vocabulary enricher ● Vocabulary enricher/text analyzer/grammar pointer ● Discussion director ● Illustrator ● Passage master	● Independent reading
Analysis	● Examine text structure and language features	● Text analyzer/grammar pointer	● Independent reading

Critical Thinking Skills	Learning Activities	Role Tasks	Literature Circles Main Activities
Inferences	● Conclude information/idea/meaning based on the text	● Illustrator ● Connector	● Independent reading
Evaluation	● Relate the text to other texts or life ● Response to other people's ideas/opinions by giving arguments	● Connector ● All role tasks	● Independent reading ● Discussion
Explanation	● Communicate ideas/opinions/arguments	● All role tasks	● Discussion
Self-regulation	● Regulate independent learning and discussion ● Complete self-assessment (smiley face/dialogue journal)	● All role tasks ● All role tasks	● Group formation ● Independent reading ● Discussion

Evaluation skill is facilitated by relating the text to life and responding to other people's ideas/opinions through arguments. In the learning process, the student who plays the role of a passage master gives the reason for his/her decision to select the interesting/important/confusing/funny passage from the text. Moreover, the student who is a connector evaluates the information of the text and how it relates to life/story/book/event. Explanation skills are facilitated in the learning process by presenting ideas and opinions. All roles have the opportunity to explain their ideas/opinions of the text. The last skill is self-regulated learning, which is facilitated by managing independent learning and discussion and completing self-assessment. All roles are managed through independent learning and discussion, although, in group formation, the teacher still guides them.

Based on the detailed description of literature circles, including activities, roles, tasks, and critical thinking skills, it can be concluded that literature circles engage students in critical thinking learning. It is elaborated in three main activities of literature circles: group formation, independent reading, and discussion, and in detailed role tasks: discussion director, vocabulary enricher, illustrator, connector, text analyzer, and grammar pointer. Furthermore, six critical thinking skills can be identified: interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation.

Discussion

It is identified in the findings that six critical thinking skills, such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulated learning, are facilitated to develop. It is in line with Facione (2020), who stated that critical thinking includes six skills: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulated learning. Moreover, Daniels (2002) and Tracey and Morrow (2017) state three mainstreams of thinking in literature circles: independent reading, collaborative learning, and reader response theory. The mainstream of thinking facilitates the development of critical thinking skills in the learning process. Based on the findings, literature circle activities comprise grouping,

independent reading, doing role tasks, and discussion. Thus, reflecting on the view and the findings, it is assumed that six critical thinking skills develop in literature circle activities, especially in independent reading and discussion involving three mainstreams of thinking: independent reading, collaborative learning, and reader response theory.

Based on the findings, during independent reading, the students engaged in structured activities such as selecting books, grouping, reading, and accomplishing tasks in their roles. They develop their critical thinking skills by creating W-H questions, analyzing the structure of text, analyzing the language function, interpreting and inferring meaning, generating ideas, and connecting text to life.

As identified in the findings, through group discussion, the students collaboratively share and discuss their tasks to understand the text. It shows that literature circles provide a collaborative learning environment. It is in line with the view that literature circles facilitate students' involvement in collaborative learning activities (Bedel, 2016; Maher, 2015). Students' collaboration in learning promotes their critical thinking skills as they share their thoughts or ideas and discuss what they have understood about the text or topic. The same view is stated by Avci (2019) that literature circles encourage students to share their thoughts and discuss the issues related to the text that affect their critical thinking and perspectives in a positive way (Avci, 2019). Moreover, another view conveys that, in collaborative learning, students learn and work to attain their learning goals; understanding texts, solving problems, and completing tasks or projects (Baker, 2015; Bedel, 2016; Maher, 2015). Therefore, it is assumed that, through discussion, students' critical thinking skills develop as they share and discuss their understandings, opinions, and ideas of the reading text with others.

In independent reading and collaborative learning, students are facilitated to engage in self-initiated inquiry learning in which they initiate and construct their learning. They develop their metacognitive ability by directing their learning. Lai (2011) defines metacognition as "thinking about thinking," which has two components: knowledge and regulation. Metacognitive knowledge comprises knowledge about oneself as a learner and the factors that might affect performance, knowledge strategies, and when and why to use them. Meanwhile, metacognitive regulation is defined as monitoring one's cognition, including planning activities, awareness of comprehension and task performance, and evaluation of the efficacy of monitoring processes and strategies (Lai, 2011). Self-regulated learning is subsumed under students' metacognitive ability in high-quality thinking. Based on the previous discussion, it is also affirmed that self-regulated learning is a critical thinking ability (Facione, 2020). In the findings, the students are encouraged to regulate their learning by setting strategies to achieve the goal, reflecting on their learning process, and identifying the factors that influenced their learning. Thus, based on the findings and views, it can be concluded that students' critical thinking skills are developed through self-regulated learning in independent and collaborative learning.

In reader-response theory, readers are facilitated in a meaningful and authentic relationship with the text by creating or generating meaning (Woodruff & Griffin, 2017). Regarding the view, it is believed that it is more effective for readers to generate meaning applied in communal reading, in which readers collaboratively communicate their ideas and understanding of the text (Y. Park, 2012). Meanwhile, based on the findings, the students are facilitated in understanding the text's meaning through independent reading and accomplishing role tasks. In these activities, the students critically respond to the reading.

Based on the findings, a writing project is an extended activity. In this writing activity, the students write an analytical exposition in which they convey their ideas, opinions, and reasons. Thus, it can be indicated that the writing tasks can increase students' critical thinking skills. Previous studies affirmed that extended tasks, such as written and creative responses in literature circles, have contributed to the development of students' critical thinking and a deeper understanding of what they have read (Diego-Medrano E. et al., 2016; Sanacore, 2013).

Despite the learning activities in literature circles stated in the findings, it can be assumed that literature circles engage students in critical thinking and learning through role tasks. Six roles and tasks have been determined in this study: discussion director, vocabulary enricher, connector, illustrator, grammar pointer, and text structure. The student who plays the role of a discussion director creates at least four questions using W-H questions. As stated in the previous study, literature circles have facilitated students' critical thinking and creativity by asking questions, making personal connections, and understanding the text (Scavanaugh, 2008). Moreover, it is stated that, during literature circles, students also learn how to generate their own questions and seek feedback from others (Cave, 2018). The findings indicate that the discussion director generates higher-level questions for students in the discussion. By answering these higher-level questions, the students develop critical thinking skills, such as analyzing the book's structure, ideas, and themes; responding to the author's purposes, interpreting, inferring, and evaluating meaning.

In the finding, the student who plays the role of a vocabulary enricher develops his or her critical thinking ability by interpreting and inferring meaning from the text. Moreover, the student who plays the role of a connector develops the ability to evaluate by relating the text to texts, stories, or life. The student who plays the role of an illustrator develops interpreting, inferring, and evaluating abilities as he or she is illustrating what is already understood from the text. The student who plays the role of a grammar pointer develops analysis ability by identifying, analyzing, and generating language functions used in the text. The last role is a text analyzer, which develops critical thinking skills by identifying, analyzing, and generating the structure of text.

The findings of this study also have implications for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, particularly in promoting quality education through the development of higher-order thinking skills. By engaging students in independent reading, collaborative discussions, and role-based learning activities, Literature Circles create opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking, communication, and self-regulated learning skills that are essential for lifelong learning. These findings suggest that Literature Circles can serve as an effective pedagogical approach to support SDG 4 by fostering student-centered learning environments that prepare learners for the challenges of the 21st century.

Thus, based on the discussion, it can be concluded that in the study, students' critical thinking skills are developed through literature circle activities such as independent reading, discussion, and role tasks. The critical thinking skills developed are interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulated learning.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study demonstrates that Literature Circles (LCs) are an effective student-centered instructional approach for fostering critical thinking skills among EFL students in secondary education. Through adapted LC activities, including group formation, independent reading, role-based tasks, and collaborative discussions, students actively

engaged in six dimensions of critical thinking: interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and self-regulation. The findings confirm that LCs provide meaningful opportunities for students to construct knowledge, exchange ideas, evaluate information, and connect texts to real-world contexts. Furthermore, the adaptation of additional roles such as text analyzer and grammar pointer enabled the integration of critical literacy practices within the EFL curriculum. **Implication:** The findings imply that teachers play a crucial role in creating learning environments that promote critical thinking. Effective implementation of LCs requires teachers to possess a clear understanding of critical thinking concepts and the flexibility to adapt LC structures to students' language proficiency levels and curricular demands. The study also highlights the potential contribution of LCs to achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 by promoting quality education through student-centered, collaborative, and higher-order thinking-oriented learning practices. Therefore, LCs can serve as a practical pedagogical strategy for EFL teachers seeking to enhance both language learning and critical literacy. **Limitation:** This study was conducted in a single private senior high school with only twelve participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational settings. In addition, the study focused primarily on describing how critical thinking was facilitated through LCs rather than measuring the extent of improvement in students' critical thinking skills over time. The findings should therefore be interpreted within the specific context of the study. **Future Research:** Future studies may involve larger and more diverse participant groups across different educational contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings. Researchers are also encouraged to employ mixed-method or experimental designs to examine the effectiveness of Literature Circles in improving critical thinking skills quantitatively. Furthermore, future investigations may explore the integration of digital or virtual Literature Circles and their potential contribution to developing critical thinking, collaboration, and other 21st-century skills in EFL learning environments.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Junie Darmaningrum contributed to the conceptualization of the study, methodology development, data collection, data analysis, investigation, literature review, visualization, and drafting of the manuscript. **Lies Amin Lestari** contributed to conceptualization, supervision, validation, critical review, and manuscript revision. **Pratiwi Retnaningdyah** contributed to supervision, validation, critical review, and manuscript revision. All authors have read, reviewed, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors state that no financial or personal conflicts of interest exist that may have affected the content or findings of this research.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools or other digital writing assistants were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All stages of the research process, including data analysis, interpretation, and manuscript writing, were conducted solely by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the content presented in this article.

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