

Enhancing English Proficiency and Critical Thinking in Large Classes: The Zuvio Hybrid Literature Circle Approach

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the impact of integrating technology, specifically the Zuvio Hybrid literature circle, into English language teaching to enhance English proficiency and critical thinking abilities among lower-intermediate students in large-class settings. Motivated by the challenges of limited opportunities for independent thinking and language use in conventional large-class English courses, this research leverages "Great Expectations" as a classical reader to provide rich language input and stimulate discussions on life education themes such as family, love, and social status. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding theories, the Zuvio hybrid literature circle was structured to foster peer interaction and critical engagement with the text. A total of 153 students from a university in Taiwan participated in this action research over a semester. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing pre- and post-tests of the College Student English Proficiency Test and a Critical Thinking Questionnaire to gather quantitative data, complemented by qualitative data from discussion records, reflective writings, and teacher observations. The quantitative results demonstrated significant improvements in students' English proficiency, with test scores increasing from an average of 199.78 to 218.09 ($p < .05$), particularly in areas of reading comprehension and vocabulary. Similarly, critical thinking scores improved from 81.02 to 82.41 ($p < .05$), with notable gains in the ability to evaluate arguments and defend personal viewpoints. The action research approach facilitated continuous refinement of teaching practices, contributing to these positive outcomes. Qualitatively, the reflective writings and discussion records revealed deeper student engagement with the text and with each other, fostering a community of learners who were more confident in expressing and debating their ideas. Teacher observations confirmed these findings, noting increased student participation and a more dynamic learning environment. These findings suggest that the Zuvio hybrid literature circle, by integrating classical literature and structured peer discussions within a technological framework, can effectively address the pedagogical challenges in large-class English teaching. This study underscores the potential of such innovative approaches to not only improve language skills but also to foster critical thinking, offering valuable insights for enhancing liberal education in similar educational contexts.

KEYWORDS: literature circle, critical thinking, graded readers, English proficiency

1. Introduction

In the rapidly evolving global landscape, the development of critical thinking skills alongside English language proficiency has become increasingly crucial for students' academic and professional success. While traditional English language education has primarily focused on linguistic competence, there is a growing recognition of the need to integrate critical thinking skills into English language curricula. This integration is essential not only for enhancing students' language abilities but also for preparing them to engage effectively with complex ideas in an interconnected world.

Recent studies have highlighted the potential of incorporating critical thinking elements into English language teaching (e.g., Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi 2015; Shirkhani and Fahim 2011). However, the implementation of such integrated approaches faces several challenges in current educational practices. Many English courses still predominantly emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and basic communication skills, often neglecting the development of higher-order thinking skills. This gap in education fails to adequately prepare students for the analytical and evaluative demands of higher education and the global workforce.

To address these shortcomings, this study proposes an innovative approach using the graded reader version of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* in conjunction with literature circles facilitated through the Zuvio online platform. Graded readers, such as this adapted classic, offer a bridge between language learning and literary analysis, providing accessible yet rich content that can stimulate critical thinking. The use of "Great Expectations" not only exposes students to complex themes and character development but also allows for an exploration of cultural and social contexts, further enhancing critical analysis skills.

The implementation of literature circles via Zuvio presents a unique opportunity to overcome the limitations of traditional English classrooms. This digital platform can create a more engaging and interactive environment where students can actively participate in discussions, share insights, and collaboratively analyze the text. By assigning specific roles within the literature circles (e.g., discussion leader, summarizer, connector), students are encouraged to approach the text from various analytical perspectives, fostering a more comprehensive understanding and critical engagement with the material.

This study seeks to explore the effectiveness of this integrated approach in improving students' critical thinking abilities alongside their English language skills. By examining the impact of using a graded classic novel within a technologically enhanced literature circle format, we aim to contribute to the development of more effective and engaging English language teaching methodologies that prepare students for the cognitive demands of the 21st century.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Application of Graded Readers in Second Language Learning

Graded readers are English learning materials specifically designed for language learners, often based on classic literature and rich in cultural depth (Nation 2008). Many educators recognize the importance of cultural literacy and argue that language learning should incorporate cultural learning (Zhang 2010). Peng (2013) argues that true English reading literacy encompasses more than just language acquisition; it also involves the ability to appreciate the literary significance of texts and the development of habitual critical thinking skills. The primary advantage of graded readers lies in their vocabulary and sentence structure, which are designed according to different proficiency levels while maintaining the compelling plot of the original work. This graded system aligns with Krashen's (1975) "i+1 input hypothesis," which posits that the most effective learning occurs when the instructional content (+1) is slightly above the learner's current ability level (i).

Numerous studies have indicated that using graded readers for extensive reading allows students to acquire more extracurricular knowledge and helps cultivate good reading habits (Mason, 2013), thereby improving their English proficiency (Mermelstein 2015). Moreover, due to the appropriate difficulty level of graded readers, students can complete readings independently, effectively enhancing their sense of self-efficacy (Al-Homoud and Schmitt 2009).

Graded readers enable students to engage in slow reading and immerse themselves in the beauty of language, thereby enhancing cultural literacy. Deep reading is a necessary process to help improve students' language and thinking logic (Hamzah, Zhaffar and Razak 2018).

2.2. Application of Zuvio in Language Courses

Zuvio, a cloud-based instant feedback system, has emerged as a valuable tool in large university language courses. By utilizing students' smartphones as feedback devices, it offers a cost-effective and efficient solution for classroom engagement. Zuvio enhances the teaching and learning experience through several key features. It allows instructors to prepare pre-class questions, encouraging student preparation and freeing up class time for discussions. The system supports various question types, including multiple-choice and open-ended questions, adapting to diverse pedagogical needs (Yan 2014). In large language classes, Zuvio significantly increases student participation, contributing to a more comprehensive exploration of course content (Chen 2019). It

also fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to formulate and submit questions (Qing, Ni and Hong 2010).

The real-time nature of Zuvio's feedback mechanism allows instructors to make dynamic adjustments to their teaching strategies and address misconceptions promptly (Wang, 2016). Additionally, its data analysis capabilities provide valuable insights for long-term student assessment and educational research (Chuang 2018).

2.3. Application of Literature Circles in English Learning

Literature circles are student-centred discussion groups where each student alternates different task roles such as vocabulary wizard, questioner, illustrator, discussion leader, summarizer, connector, culture collector, and passage person (Daniels 2006). In literature circles, teachers play the role of facilitators and reading companions (Anggara et al. 2018).

The theoretical foundations of literature circles are rooted in several key concepts:

- 1) Collaborative Learning and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): This theory emphasizes that peer interaction is a necessary condition for students' internalization process (Vygotsky 1978).
- 2) Reader Response Theory: Holland (1998) pointed out that even the same words, symbols, and paragraphs have different meanings for each reader, emphasizing the importance of readers' diverse backgrounds in interpretation.
- 3) Autonomous Reading: Literature circles align with the requirements for cultivating autonomous reading, which is crucial in a rapidly changing society and an era of lifelong learning (Fujigaki 2018).

Empirical research has shown that literature circles can effectively improve students' reading abilities. Widodo's (2015) research showed that incorporating literature circles into intensive reading courses could effectively enhance students' comprehension of text meaning and reading focus. Low and Jacobs' (2018) research demonstrated that literature circles enhanced language fluency and higher-order thinking skills through peer interaction and discussion

2.4. Critical Thinking in Higher Education

Critical thinking, defined by Moore and Parker (2009) as the careful application of logical reasoning to evaluate claims, is a fundamental skill in higher education. The American Association of University Professors recognizes it as a crucial indicator of educational quality. However, recent studies suggest that university students' critical thinking skills often fall short of desired levels (Dinira 2019; Suyitno 2020).

Several pedagogical approaches have shown promise in fostering critical thinking:

- 4) English Reading Education: Hamzah et al. (2018) found that English reading enhances students' linguistic cognitive logic, while literary works cultivate cultural literacy and deepen understanding (Grabe and Stoller 2011).
- 5) Theme-Based Instruction: This approach encourages students to establish meaningful connections between different content areas. Kang and Keinonen (2018) demonstrated its effectiveness in developing critical thinking skills.
- 6) Flipped Teaching: Hsu and Hsiang's (2016) quasi-experimental study revealed that flipped teaching allows students to explore content more deeply and develop enhanced critical thinking skills.

As Kurniawati (2020) notes, critical thinking is an acquirable skill that can be enhanced through targeted training and application. The integration of graded readers, Zuvio-facilitated literature circles, and critical thinking strategies presents a promising approach to address the gap between desired and actual levels of critical thinking skills in higher education while simultaneously enhancing English language proficiency.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, primarily using action research supplemented by quantitative analysis. The aim is to explore the impact of the Zuvio literature circle on students' English proficiency and critical thinking ability.

3.1. Research Design

The research was implemented over one academic year in the "General English 5" course at a university in Taiwan. The study framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

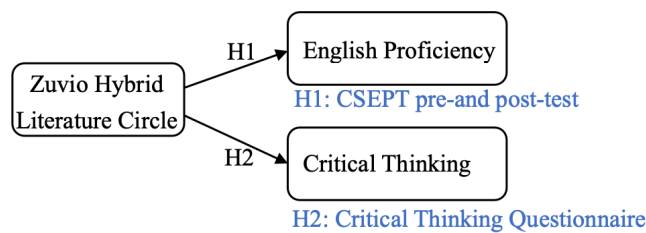


Figure 1. Research Framework

3.2. Participants and Setting

The participants in this study were 153 students enrolled in three sections of the "General English 5" course at a university in Taiwan. Their English proficiency levels ranged from CEFR B1 to B2, with CSEPT scores between 180 and 219. The students came from various departments, including English, Japanese, German, French, Spanish, Communication Arts, Translation, International Affairs, and International Business Management. The study took place in both physical classrooms and on the Zuvio online platform.

3.3. Scope of the Study

In terms of data collection, the two research questions were addressed using a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Qualitative data were analysed using triangulation, which combined multiple data sources to enhance the validity and reliability of the research. The qualitative data collected included discussion records from the Zuvio platform's reading circles, interview transcripts, teacher's weekly classroom observation logs, and feedback from teaching evaluations. These diverse sources provided rich qualitative insights, enabling a deeper understanding of the impact of Zuvio reading circles on students' English proficiency and development of critical thinking skills. For quantitative data, the study conducted pre- and post-tests using a critical thinking skills assessment (Appendix 1) and the College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT) before and after the second phase of the study. The standardized test scores provided objective quantitative data to assess students' progress in English proficiency and critical thinking skills. Additionally, mid-term and end-of-term oral and writing test scores served as supplementary quantitative data to comprehensively evaluate students' language proficiency.

3.4. Research Instruments

The quantitative tools included the CSEPT for both pre- and post-tests and a Critical Thinking Disposition Scale. The CSEPT, developed by the Language Training and Testing Center, is a standardized test designed to assess the effectiveness of English teaching and student outcomes in domestic universities. It measures participants' listening and reading proficiency in everyday and academic contexts. The Critical Thinking Disposition Scale consists of 25 items on a five-point Likert scale. The overall Cronbach's α for the scale is .877, indicating high internal consistency reliability (Kobylarek 2022). This demonstrates the instrument's validity and reliability in accurately assessing students' critical thinking skills.

4. Results

4.1. English Proficiency Level

To assess the improvement in students' English proficiency, this study conducted pre- and post-tests using the College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT), focusing on listening and reading comprehension. A paired-samples t-test analysis revealed that participants demonstrated significant improvement in the post-test compared to the pre-test ($t(152) = -14.83$, $p < .001$). Specifically, the mean post-test score was 18.31 points higher than the pre-test score ($SD = 15.3$). These results indicate that the literature circle teaching method integrated with Zuvio had a positive impact on enhancing students' English language proficiency.

Table 1. Paired Samples T-Test Results: CSEPT Pre-test vs. Post-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
	mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-tailed P	Two-tailed P
				Lower	Upper				
Pretest-posttest	-18.31	15.3	1.24	-20.75	-15.87	-14.83	152	<.001	<.001

Analysis of students' midterm and final performance revealed significant improvements in both language skills. In terms of speaking proficiency, students' mean scores increased from 71.17 in the pre-test to 73.30 in the post-test, demonstrating an improvement of 2.13 points. Writing ability showed slightly higher gains, with mean scores rising from 69.69 to 72.39, indicating a 2.70-point improvement. These results may reflect the efficacy of the Hybrid Reading Circle approach combined with the Zuvio system, particularly in enhancing students' written expression skills.

Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test Results: Speaking and Writing Pre-test vs. Post-test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Significance
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				Two-Sided p
				Lower	Upper			
Speaking pre-post	-2.13	5.08	.41	-2.94	-1.320	-5.19	152	<.001
Writing pre-post	-2.70	6.04	.49	-3.66	-1.735	-5.53	152	<.001

These findings provide preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of the integrated literature circle and Zuvio system approach in fostering language skill development, with a particular strength in improving written communication abilities.

4.2. Critical Thinking Ability

The impact of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach on students' critical thinking ability was assessed using pre-test and post-test measurements. Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for these assessments.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Critical Thinking Pre-test and Post-test Scores

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
pretest	81.0261	153	6.25547	.50572
posttest	82.4183	153	5.66919	.45833

Table 3 shows that the mean critical thinking score increased from 81.0261 (SD = 6.25547) in the pre-test to 82.4183 (SD = 5.66919) in the post-test. This indicates a modest improvement in critical thinking skills following the intervention. The decrease in standard deviation suggests a slight reduction in the variability of scores post-intervention. To determine the statistical significance of this improvement, a paired samples t-test was conducted. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Paired Samples T-Test Results for Critical Thinking Pre-test vs. Post-test

	Paired Differences						Significance		
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Interval Difference	Confidence of the t		df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper			
Pretest-posttest	-1.39	5.35	.43	-2.25	-.54	-3.21	152	<.001	.002

The paired samples t-test revealed a statistically significant increase in critical thinking scores from pre-test to post-test ($M = -1.39$, $SD = 5.35$), $t(152) = -3.21$, $p = .002$ (two-tailed). The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -2.25 to -0.54. The negative t-value indicates that the post-test scores were significantly higher than the pre-test scores.

These results suggest that the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach was effective in enhancing students' critical thinking abilities. While the improvement was modest in absolute terms (an increase of 1.39 points), it was consistent across the sample and statistically significant. The small p-value ($p < .001$ for one-sided, $p = .002$ for two-sided) provides strong evidence against the null hypothesis of no difference between pre-test and post-test scores.

The effect size, calculated using Cohen's d , was 0.26, indicating a small to medium effect. This suggests that while the improvement was statistically significant, the practical significance of the intervention on critical thinking skills was moderate.

5. Discussion and Implications

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the efficacy of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach in enhancing both English proficiency and critical thinking skills among lower-intermediate university students in large-class settings. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on technology-enhanced language learning and the integration of critical thinking in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

5.1. Improvement in English Proficiency

The significant improvement in CSEPT scores (mean increase of 18.31 points, $p < .001$) aligns with previous research on the benefits of extensive reading using graded readers (Mason 2013; Mermelstein 2015). The substantial gains in both listening and reading comprehension suggest that the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach provided students with rich, comprehensible input, supporting Krashen's (1975) input hypothesis. The use of "Great Expectations" as a graded reader

likely contributed to this improvement by offering students exposure to complex language structures and vocabulary in a scaffolded manner.

The notable improvements in speaking (2.13 points increase) and writing (2.70 points increase) skills are particularly encouraging. These results suggest that the interactive nature of the literature circles, facilitated by the Zuvio platform, provided students with ample opportunities for language production. This finding supports the importance of output in language acquisition, as proposed by Swain's (1993) output hypothesis. The slightly higher gains in writing compared to speaking may be attributed to the increased time for reflection and composition afforded by the online platform, allowing students to craft more thoughtful and structured responses.

5.2. Enhancement of Critical Thinking Skills

The statistically significant improvement in critical thinking scores (mean increase of 1.39 points, $p = .002$) demonstrates the potential of literature circles to foster higher-order thinking skills. While the effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.26$) indicates a small to medium effect, this improvement is noteworthy given the relatively short duration of the intervention and the complex nature of critical thinking development. This finding aligns with previous research by Widodo (2015) and Low and Jacobs (2018), who found that literature circles can enhance higher-order thinking skills through peer interaction and discussion. The structured roles within the literature circles (e.g., questioner, summarizer, connector) likely contributed to this improvement by encouraging students to approach the text from various analytical perspectives.

The integration of technology through the Zuvio platform appears to have amplified these benefits. The platform's features, such as real-time feedback and data analysis capabilities, may have allowed for more dynamic and responsive discussions, supporting the findings of Wang (2016) and Chuang (2018) on the benefits of technology-enhanced feedback in language learning.

5.3. Theoretical Implications

The success of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach can be understood through several theoretical lenses:

- 1) Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The peer interaction facilitated by literature circles likely created opportunities for students to operate within their ZPD, supporting cognitive development and language acquisition (Vygotsky 1978).
- 2) Reader Response Theory: The diverse interpretations and discussions encouraged by the literature circle format align with Holland's (1998) emphasis on the importance of readers' backgrounds in text interpretation.
- 3) Autonomous Learning: The structure of literature circles, combined with the accessibility of the Zuvio platform, may have fostered greater learner autonomy, a crucial skill in lifelong learning (Fujigaki 2018).

5.4. Practical Implications

This study offers several practical implications for EFL educators and curriculum designers:

- 1) Integration of Technology: The successful use of Zuvio demonstrates the potential of technology to enhance engagement and facilitate meaningful discussions in large classes.
- 2) Use of Graded Readers: The study supports the incorporation of graded classic literature as a means to improve language proficiency while simultaneously developing critical thinking skills.
- 3) Structured Peer Interaction: The literature circle format provides a replicable model for fostering student-centered, collaborative learning environments.
- 4) Holistic Skill Development: The simultaneous improvement in language proficiency and critical thinking underscores the potential for integrated approaches in EFL curricula.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the impact of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach on English proficiency and critical thinking skills among lower-intermediate university students in large-class settings. The findings provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of this innovative pedagogical approach in addressing dual challenges in EFL education.

The significant improvements observed in both English proficiency and critical thinking skills underscore the potential of integrating technology-enhanced literature circles into EFL curricula. By leveraging the Zuvio platform to facilitate structured peer interactions around rich literary content, this approach offers a promising model for overcoming the limitations often associated with large-class language instruction.

Key outcomes of this study include:

- 1) Substantial gains in English proficiency, as evidenced by significant improvements in CSEPT scores and notable enhancements in speaking and writing skills.
- 2) Statistically significant improvement in critical thinking abilities, demonstrating the potential of literature circles to foster higher-order cognitive skills.
- 3) Successful integration of technology to support collaborative learning and dynamic discussions in large-class settings.

These results have important implications for EFL pedagogy, suggesting that the combination of graded classic literature, structured peer interaction, and technology-enhanced learning environments can create a synergistic effect in promoting both language acquisition and critical thinking development.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While the results are promising, several considerations should be acknowledged:

- 1) Sample Characteristics: The study was conducted at a single university in Taiwan, potentially limiting generalizability to other contexts.
- 2) Duration: A longer intervention period might yield more substantial improvements, particularly in critical thinking skills.
- 3) Research Design: As an action research study, this investigation focused on improving teaching practices and student outcomes in a specific context. While this approach provided valuable insights, it limits the ability to make broad generalizations about the effectiveness of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach compared to other methods.

Future research could address these considerations by:

- 7) Conducting multi-site studies across diverse EFL contexts.
- 8) Implementing longitudinal designs to assess long-term impacts.
- 9) Employing quasi-experimental research designs to compare the effectiveness of this approach with traditional methods. This would allow for a more robust evaluation of the Zuvio hybrid literature circle approach relative to other teaching strategies.
- 10) Exploring the differential impacts on various subgroups (e.g., by proficiency level or academic major).

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