

# Using Online Literature Circles to Engage EFL Students in Collaborative Learning and Its Effect on Student' Self-efficacy

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**Abstract:** Online literature circles can be powerful and beneficial for promoting the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). This study aims to investigate the influence of using online literature circles as an instructional method on EFL students' English self-efficacy. This study involves 228 second-year college students at a university in North China. A pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was conducted to examine whether students' English self-efficacy would change after their participation in the online literature circles activities. The results indicated that the students' self-efficacy in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing has all improved after participating in online literature circles activities.

**Keywords:** Literature circles, collaborative learning, self-efficacy, wiki, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Literature circles are "small peer-led discussion groups, involved in reading the same piece of literature, and who come together on a regular programmed basis to share interpretations of what they have read" (Shelton-Strong, 2012, p. 214). Literature circles have been considered as a sound instructional method that could provide a social space for students to engage in collaborative learning (Widodo, 2016). When participating in literature circles activities, students were assigned with different roles like discussion leader, culture collector, passage person, and word master. Through the fulfillment of each role and by interacting with other members in the literature circles, students become active learners rather than passive receivers. Previous research has documented the benefits of literature circles activities in facilitating peer communication, promoting language acquisition, and fostering learning autonomy (Daniels, 2006; Su, Li et al., 2019; Widodo, 2016).

With the increasing interest in using Web 2.0 tools (e.g., wiki, blog, chatroom) in language education, language teaching researchers and practitioners have called for moving traditional literature circles into online space so as to enhance collaboration and advance the pedagogy of literature circles (Larson, 2009). In particular, Hathaway (2011) points out that merging wiki technology with literature circles becomes especially powerful and beneficial for synthesizing the skills of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity with 21<sup>st</sup> century technology skills. Organizing online literature circles can also be a boon for learners who are shy and reluctant to share ideas in face-to-face literature circles. However, most of previous studies on online literature circles were carried out in the context of first or native language education. Few studies have been conducted on the design and implementation of online literature circles in the context of teaching English as a foreign language.

Self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs in their abilities to complete specific tasks and attain goals (Bandura, 1997). Although several studies have explored the positive influence of online collaborative learning on students' self-efficacy, most of them were situated in other domains like science and mathematics (e.g., Chen, Wang, & Lin, 2015). There is scarce literature examining the impact of instruction based on online collaborative learning on language learners' self-efficacy.

In the present study, online literature circles activities were designed and implemented as a way to promote collaborative learning in an EFL course at a key university in North China. This study aims to investigate whether the online literature circles activities can improve the students' English self-efficacy.

## 2. Procedure

### 2.1 Participants

This research involved 228 second-year undergraduate students (around 18~19 years old) enrolled at a university in North China. As most of the students were majoring in computer science, telecommunications, and electronic information science, more male students (159 males) were included in this research. Before taking part in the study, all the participants had more than six years of formal English language learning experience in schools. They also had one-year experience of blended English language learning at the university. The participants were representative of the EFL learners at the university in terms of their English ability. Like most college students in China, the participants lack opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

### 2.2 Design and implementation of online literature circles

In this study, the collaborative learning takes the form of Wiki-based literature circles. In the light of previous studies of literature circles (e.g., Widodo, 2016), students in this study are required to form groups of five members and finish literature circles on wikis where they share ideas, feelings, questions, connections, and judgments about the materials they read. Figure 1 illustrates the procedure of the collaborative learning activity and the task roles of the literature circles.

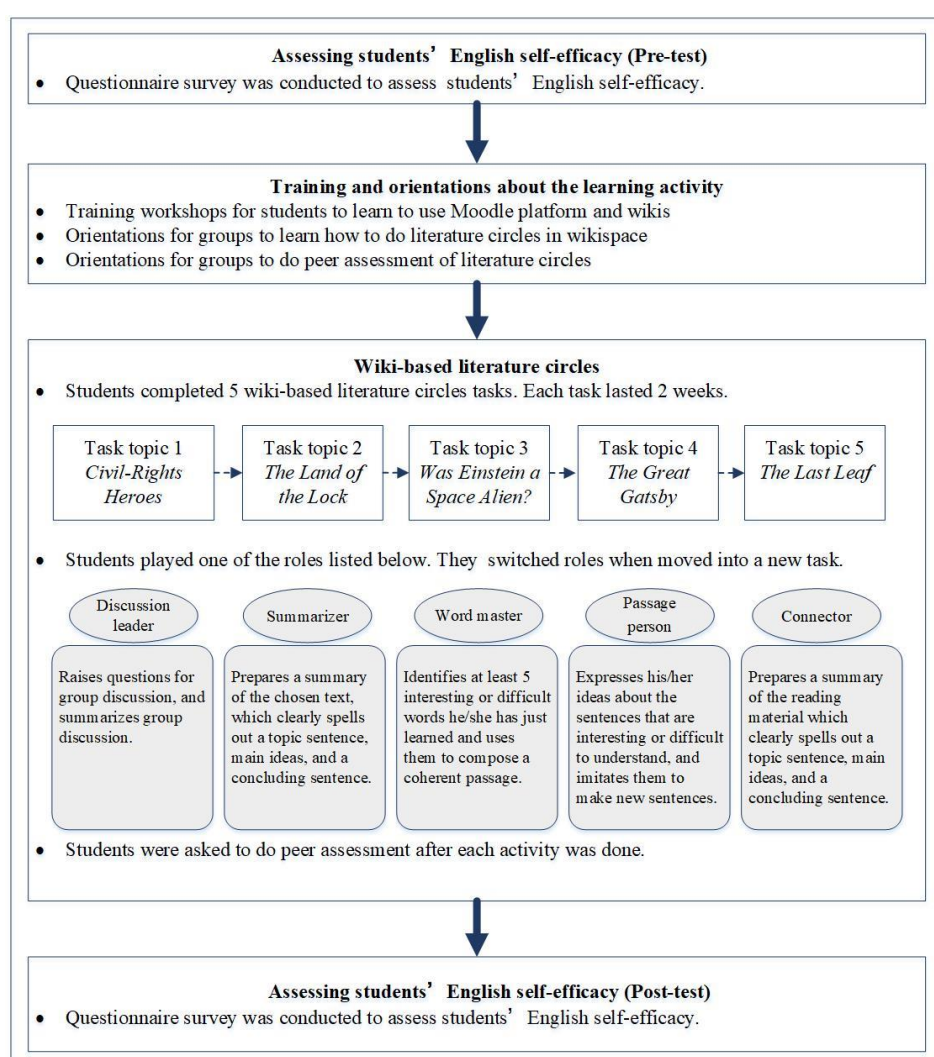


Figure 1. Procedure of the collaborative learning activity

Students carried out their literature circles in a self-paced manner and all the task-related communication took place via online messages and discussion boards. Students were also scheduled to meet the teachers once a week for a two-hour face-to-face discussion about their literature circles. Altogether, students conducted five different literature circles tasks based on five articles of different genres. Group members were required to switch the roles when starting a new task so that each of them could have a complete experience of doing literature circles. Figure 2 shows a snapshot of students' literature circles on the wikispace of the Moodle learning platform.



Figure 2. A snapshot of students' literature circles on Moodle

### 2.3 Data collection and analysis

This research adapted the English language self-efficacy (ELSE) questionnaire (Su et al., 2018) to assess students' English self-efficacy in four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The questionnaire consisted of 32 items concerning students' belief about how capable they were to complete specific tasks in English. Each factor of the ELSE questionnaire comprised of 9 to 13 items that were presented in the format of five-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1 (I cannot do it at all) to 5 (I can do it well). The sample questions of the four components are shown as follows:

- Listening self-efficacy: Can you understand English lectures of general topics?
- Speaking self-efficacy: Can you ask your English instructor questions in English?
- Reading self-efficacy: Can you read short English narratives?
- Writing self-efficacy: Can you use accurate grammar when you write English essays?

The participants' English self-efficacy was measured before they participated in the literature circles activities. A post-test of the participants' English self-efficacy was conducted at the end of the course. After deleting invalid questionnaire data, 228 students' responses remained for analyses. The present study first employed exploratory factor analysis to examine the factor structure and the construct validity of the ELSE questionnaire. The reliability coefficient was also collected to ensure the internal consistency of the measurements as a whole. Finally, paired sample t-test was conducted to examine whether students' English self-efficacy has improved after their participation in the online literature circles activities.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Principal component analysis of the English self-efficacy questionnaire

A principal component analysis was performed on the 32 items of the ELSE questionnaire. Four factors were recognized, and they accounted for 66.15% of total variance. Consequently, 30 items of the questionnaire remained in the finalized ELSE. As shown in Table 1, the four self-efficacy sub-scales

were listening (Mean = 3.22, S.D. = 0.82), speaking (Mean = 3.72, S.D. = 0.70), reading (Mean = 3.55, S.D. = 0.68), and writing (Mean = 3.84, S.D. = 0.66). The reliability coefficient for each scale in this study ranged from 0.88 to 0.94, with an overall reliability of 0.96. The results suggest the satisfactory reliability for measuring students' English self-efficacy.

Table 1

*Rotated factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha values for the four sub-scales of the ELSE*

	Factor 1 Listening	Factor 2 Speaking	Factor 3 Reading	Factor 4 Writing
Factor 1: Listening, $\alpha = 0.93$ , Mean = 3.22, S.D. = 0.82				
Listening 1	0.72			
Listening 2	0.73			
Listening 3	0.76			
Listening 4	0.75			
Listening 5	0.66			
Listening 6	0.77			
Listening 7	0.82			
Listening 8	0.75			
Factor 2: Speaking, $\alpha = 0.94$ , Mean = 3.72, S.D. = 0.70				
Speaking 1		0.59		
Speaking 2		0.67		
Speaking 3		0.56		
Speaking 4		0.73		
Speaking 5		0.70		
Speaking 6		0.78		
Speaking 7		0.72		
Speaking 8		0.70		
Speaking 9		0.70		
Speaking 10		0.75		
Factor 3: Reading, $\alpha = 0.88$ , Mean = 3.55, S.D. = 0.68				
Reading 1			0.72	
Reading 2			0.72	
Reading 3			0.67	
Reading 4			0.58	
Reading 5			0.64	
Reading 6			0.56	
Factor 4: Writing, $\alpha = 0.88$ , Mean = 3.84, S.D. = 0.66				
Writing 1				0.73
Writing 2				0.78
Writing 3				0.70
Writing 4				0.65
Writing 5				0.71
Writing 6				0.49

Note: Overall reliability coefficient: 0.96; Total variance explained: 66.15%

### 3.2 Differences in English self-efficacy between the pre-test and the post-test results

Paired sample t-test analyses were conducted to examine whether the implementation of online literature circles activities had influence on the student's English self-efficacy. Results indicated that, compared with the pre-test results, the students scored higher in the post-test on the four dimensions of English self-efficacy and significant differences were observed on all dimensions (see Table 2). The

results clearly suggested that the students' English self-efficacy was improved after participating in online literature circles activities.

Table 2

*Comparison of English self-efficacy between the pre-test and post-test*

	Pre-test		Post-test		<i>t</i> value significance
	M	SD	M	SD	
Listening	2.87	0.77	3.21	0.82	7.06***
Speaking	3.40	0.75	3.72	0.70	6.52***
Reading	3.33	0.73	3.55	0.68	4.29***
Writing	3.59	0.70	3.84	0.66	5.40***

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper reports on the design and implementation of online literature circles activities to engage EFL students in collaborative learning. It further examines whether students' English self-efficacy improves as a result of participating in online literature circles activities. The research results indicate that online literature circles activities have positive influence on EFL students' English self-efficacy. In other words, students' self-efficacy in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing has improved after participating in online literature circles activities.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. This research did not involve a control group to examine the impact of online literature circles on students' self-efficacy. It is encouraged that experimental studies be conducted to examine the influence of the treatment of online literature circles in students' English self-efficacy. It should be noted that the present study only employed quantitative measures. Future study could consider using more in-depth qualitative methods to examine the effectiveness of using online literature circles as an instructional method.

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