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# Using literature circles in the ESL college classroom: A lesson from Puerto Rico

## El uso de los círculos de literatura en las aulas de ESL en la universidad: una lección desde Puerto Rico

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### Abstract

This paper will use data collected from a case study of a Basic English course at the University of Puerto Rico where literature circles were used to promote understanding of a novel dealing with issues of race, class and privilege. The article will trace both the implementation of the literature circles and the use of students' first language to facilitate the reading of *The Boy Without a Flag* by Abraham Rodríguez Jr. Special attention will be paid to the use of literature circles to promote student participation, both orally and in written form, as well as in discussions of topics relevant to students. The implementation of literature circles in the classroom facilitated student participation, as they worked together to mediate meaning and discuss what they felt was important about the assigned reading. Findings suggest that students benefited from the use of their first language since it served as a cognitive tool that allowed them to collaboratively scaffold while also enabling the instructor to gauge reading comprehension. Moreover, selecting a text whose content tapped into students' funds of knowledge promoted classroom participation about topics and issues students deemed relevant both inside and outside the English classroom.

**Keywords:** adult learners, ESL, first language, literature circles, relevancy

### Resumen

El artículo utilizará datos recopilados a través de una monografía llevada a cabo en un curso de inglés básico en la Universidad de Puerto Rico, donde se incorporaron círculos literarios para promover la comprensión de una novela que trata sobre los conceptos de raza, clase y privilegio. El artículo trazará la implementación de círculos literarios y el uso del primer idioma de los estudiantes para facilitar la lectura del libro *The Boy Without a Flag* por Abraham Rodríguez Jr. Se prestará atención especial al uso de círculos literarios para promover participación por parte de los estudiantes, tanto escrita como oral, así como en la discusión de temas relevantes para los estudiantes. La implementación de los círculos literarios en el salón facilitó la participación por parte de los estudiantes mientras estos trabajaron juntos en la mediación de significado y las discusiones de lo que estos consideraron más importante en las lecturas asignadas. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes fueron beneficiados al utilizar su primer idioma, ya que este sirvió como una herramienta cognoscitiva que les permitió practicar andamiaje colectivo mientras permitió al instructor medir comprensión de lectura. Por último, seleccionar

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un texto que conecta con los fondos de conocimiento de los estudiantes promovió participación y discusión grupal de temas y asuntos que los estudiantes consideraron relevantes tanto dentro como fuera del salón.

*Palabras clave:* estudiantes adultos, ESL, primer idioma, círculos literarios, relevancia

## Introduction

Research on literature circles has documented their benefit to students as they enable learners to engage with literature in a way that facilitates critical thinking and strengthens communication skills while providing a meaningful literacy experience (Fredricks, 2012; Lin, 2004; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Saunders-Brunner, 2004). The term "literature circles" was coined by Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) who argue that the aim is to have students discuss "their understandings and personal and literary connections to what they read" (p. 42).

These circles support reading as a transaction which Louise Rosenblatt (1982) describes as a process in which readers actively construct understandings by bringing meaning to as well as taking meaning from a text. They are not trying to extract information from a text, figure out the interpretation the teacher wants to hear, or learn about literary elements. They enter the world of literature to learn about life and to make sense of their experiences and feelings. (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 195)

Harvey and Daniels (2009) define literature circles as "small, peer-led discussions" (p. 198) which involve placing students in groups and having them discuss parts of a particular book, story, or film after writing their notes on the subject. Daniels' (1994) variation on traditional literature circles involves dividing students in small groups and having them work on texts, usually by assigning a different role for each group member. Although Daniels (1994) originally promoted the use of role sheets to guide the discussion, he envisioned it as a tool to teach students to remain on topic, suggesting that "in many classrooms, the role sheets are abandoned as soon as groups are capable of lively, text-centered, multifaceted discussions" (Daniels, 1994, p. 75). According to Lin (2004), "among the roles commonly assigned are: questioner (developing questions to discuss), illustrators (drawing and/or sharing interesting sections of the text), literary luminary/passage master (identifying interesting

sections of the text for reading aloud), and connectors (making text-to-text and text-to-life connections)" (p. 24). Within each literature circle, the dynamic would potentially enable students to act as agents in their own learning and promote a low-risk environment, making them especially effective in ESL classrooms (Lin, 2004).

Literature circles have many benefits for students, not only for the skills they develop in terms of critical thinking, reading and writing, allowing them to engage in discussion and reflection on a wide variety of topics presented through literary texts, but because they can also encourage language acquisition in ESL classrooms. Furthermore, Ellis and Fellow (2008) argue that learners benefit from engaging in communicative exercises in the classroom in order to be exposed to "formulaic expressions" which allow them to internalize the target language rules and achieve language competence (p. 1). Moreover, decontextualized language lessons focusing on exercises such as memorization and repetition, even when employed by well-meaning ESL teachers, can come across as impersonal and ineffective in terms of connecting to students' background and context (Freeman & Freeman, 2002).

An issue of contention in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms is the use of students' first language and its role in second language acquisition (SLA), taking into consideration the uses, purposes, and attitudes behind its use or lack thereof (Halasa & Al-Manaseer, 2012). According to Ho Lee and Macaro (2013), the use of students' native language in an ESL classroom has faced opposition from policy makers and producers of language materials around the world.

However, research suggests that the use of students' first language "helps students understand the meaning of new or difficult words, explain complex syntactic rules, and save time... show[ing] that not allowing students to use their first language will result in prohibiting them to have some opportunities to learn English better" (Hussein, 2013, p. 175). Additionally,

studies such as Alegría de la Colina and Del Pilar García Mayo (2009) and Moll and Díaz (1987) suggest that teachers, when able to, should use students' first language for classroom management tasks and to build students' reading comprehension.

Although plenty of research has focused on the benefits of incorporating literature circles in elementary classrooms, little research has been published on the use of such literature circles with college level learners of English as a second language. By establishing literature circles in ESL classrooms, teachers can potentially encourage language acquisition by providing material that is culturally relevant, while simultaneously promoting dialogue that can lead to important comprehensible input (Krashen, 2003). In addition, a byproduct of such a method is that the instructor can also encourage critical thinking and discussion of topics that are pertinent to students' context, forming a learning space that will help students create a dialogue about important issues that can very well extend beyond the classroom. This paper will use data collected from a case study of a Basic English course at the University of Puerto Rico where literature circles were used to facilitate understanding of a novel dealing with issues of race, class and privilege. In this article, we will trace both the implementation of the literature circles and the use of Spanish as they facilitated the reading of *The Boy Without a Flag* by Abraham Rodríguez (1992). Special attention will be paid to the use of literature circles to promote student participation, both orally and in written form, as well as discussion of topics relevant to students. Furthermore, the use of Spanish, the students' first language, will be discussed as a way to motivate students to further engage in the readings and provide the teacher with sufficient information to assess reading comprehension in the classroom. The paper will conclude with suggestions for the implementation of literature circles in the college ESL classroom.

### *Theoretical Framework and Literature Review*

There is much to be said about the impact of individuals' sociocultural contexts and what they contribute in terms of development. Carrington and Luke (1997) argue on the impact of cultural capital and the concept that people gather their ideas about

everything around them, including what they define as success, education, and literacy, not in formal education but rather through their social networks. Their argument ties in with Vygotsky's ideas of psychological development and the impact of social components in learning (Moll, 2004). Bruffee (1984) also observes that we learn through our peers, as well as by conversing and being exposed to our social and historical context. Furthermore, our thoughts reflect our conversations, and our conversations are the product of the constant exchange of knowledge gathered through commonly shared beliefs, values, biases, and arguments, explaining that "to understand any kind of knowledge we must understand... the social justification of belief" (Bruffee, 1984, p. 640).

Since experts have explored and ascertained the relationship between historical context, culture, and an individual's development, it is not surprising that research has turned to studying how sociocultural aspects affect students in the learning environment. Although this connection between students and their sociocultural contexts can apply to any classroom, this paper will focus on research concerned with ESL students and the background knowledge they bring to a classroom specifically designed to promote language acquisition. Fleet (2006) argues that culture and language are intrinsically related and that students must acquire sociocultural awareness in order to effectively acquire a language. According to Fleet (2006), addressing the cultures of the target language in the classroom can have significant long-term results, as it can shape positive perspectives on cultural diversity and helps dispel myths, allowing students to perceive cultures, including their own, in a different way. Lastly, Fleet (2006) argues that cultural awareness can result in the development of communicative competence, which includes verbal and non-verbal components, by promoting reflection and discussion. However, learning about the target language's cultures is not the only way in which sociocultural context has impact in the ESL classroom. Freeman and Freeman (2002) argue that the goal of an effective, supportive teacher is to structure classroom activities in a way that bridges learners' gaps, and one way of doing so is to create a more personal, effective learning environment by connecting students' background and context to their teaching. Similarly, Kim (2005) argues that students need to use language in a "meaningful

and authentic" (p. 21) way, suggesting dialogue journals as ongoing conversations that incorporate students' backgrounds, thus encouraging language acquisition, self-reflection, and cultural tolerance simultaneously.

The literature circles we used in this unit were ultimately influenced and couched within Rosenblatt's (1982) reader response theory, where reading is viewed as a transaction, "a two-way process involving a reader and a text at a particular time and under particular circumstances" (p. 268). According to Rosenblatt (1982), reading falls somewhere on the continuum between the aesthetic and the efferent stances. Aesthetic reading is defined as:

Draw[ing] on our reservoir of past experience with people and the world...we lend our sensations, our emotions, our sense of being alive, to the new experience which, we feel, corresponds to the text. We participate in the story, we identify with the characters, we share their conflicts and their feelings. (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 270)

Efferent reading, on the other hand, is described as "an organized report on, or articulation of, our response to a work... and abstracting and categorizing of elements of the aesthetic experience, and an ordering and development of our concurrent reactions" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 270). Rosenblatt argues in favor of a more aesthetic stance when dealing with literature in classrooms, and suggests that teachers be receptive to students' reactions and further reflection when discussing literature; "questions can be sufficiently open to enable the young readers to select concrete details or parts of the text that had struck them most forcibly" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 276). Literature circles allow students to explore, formulate questions, and highlight passages that they find meaningful enabling both the aesthetic and efferent experiences refers to. Students can engage in organization, interpretation or explanation (an efferent stance) in their ability to handle peer responses, and enhanced reading skills are a "by-product" (Rosenblatt, 1982) of this experience. Rosenblatt concludes that "aesthetic reading of a text is a unique creation, woven out of the inner life and thought of the reader... a rich

source of insight and truth" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 277).

Furthermore, literature circles encourage critical thinking in classrooms. Fredricks (2012) offers suggestions to effectively incorporate literature circles in the classroom. These suggestions include selecting "an initial body of texts that reflects a range of factors that could make literature relatable, including gender, social class, religion, regional proximity, ethnic diversity, and linguistic similarities" (p. 503). Saunders-Brunner (2004) argues that one of the primary potential benefits of literature circles is that they can help students become independent learners, developing information literacy standards, where students are able to move from individually creating meaning to socially negotiating that meaning with others. Lin (2004) also focuses on the benefits of incorporating literature circles in the classroom, arguing that they enable students to engage in and embrace literacy practices.

Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) implemented a variation of literature circles in an elementary classroom of English native speakers. In this particular example, they showed films based on books and allowed students to choose their favorite film in order to create literature circles. Students read excerpts of the book they chose and were asked to make notes and drawings based on their impressions before engaging in discussion. The authors found that "often children who could not handle the text prior to the experience... could read the book by the time the experience had ended. Meaning rather than phonics was their access point to reading" (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 43). These findings obviously have implications for students in ESL classrooms where building on students' background and use of their first language could potentially facilitate efficient understanding of a text.

Despite the documented advantages of such an approach, literature circles are not without criticism. Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011) concede that literature circles can be an effective teaching strategy for teachers when dealing with multicultural texts, but they stress the importance of modifying the traditional strategy by providing students with the

necessary tools to have critical discussions, as well as establishing adequate guidance in the process to encourage critical thinking and dialogue as opposed to a simple exchange of personal remarks. Thein, Guise, and Sloan's (2011) suggestions for establishing literature circles include:

Model[ing] productive participation by using non-judgmental language... and employ[ing] tentative thinking and language.

Listen[ing] carefully and then ask[ing] authentic questions to prompt elaboration...seek clarification...or request detail.

Encourage[ing] consideration of alternative perspectives by soliciting them from students...voicing various prototypical stances...or imagining characters' stances.

Challeng[ing] students' use of status quo language by critiquing the discourse but not the intention. (p. 23)

While Thein, Guise, and Sloan (2011) argue in favor of providing structure for students to promote critical thinking and meaningful dialogue, Short (1998) cautions against providing too much structure. She argues that too much structure can take away from the real "collaborative communities [which] go beyond cooperating with someone else to learning from and with others" (p. 34). Among the characteristics distinguishing cooperation from collaboration, Short (1998) mentions students' ability to come to know each other, since it would allow students to feel more comfortable talking and sharing, and incorporating units that enable children to draw from past experiences and share personal knowledge so that, in the words of a third grader participating in their study, students can "get to know other people better and how that book relates to their lives and how you and them relate" (p. 37).

In terms of establishing roles, Harvey and Daniels (2009) acknowledge possible drawbacks, arguing "role sheets become mechanical, hindering rather than empowering lively, spontaneous discussion" (p. 200). According to the authors, literature circles should reflect lifelike scenarios. "When they finish a

book, real readers usually *talk about it*- with anyone they can find. And once they have talked themselves out, they go and find another book to read. So, since we want school to be as lifelike as possible, we backed off on cute but artificial lit circle projects, even as we sought better ways to extend the learning" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 200). Although Daniels had originally proposed the use of roles within literature circles, he has since changed his stance, opting to use "Post-its, journals, bookmarks, or drawings to harvest [students'] responses as they read" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 200). Short (1998) also address the use of roles; they agree that the practice can be problematic, since strict roles are viewed as having "boundaries and territories to defend" (p.43). Even so, they concede, "when roles are flexible, they can be generated by the needs of the particular project and filled as individuals recognize what they can contribute to that project" (p. 43). Although there are concerns with the use of roles in literature circles, they undoubtedly provide advantages in classrooms where students are hesitant to engage in conversation, not only because they need to share ideas with peers in a highly competitive environment like a university, but because of their difficulties with a second language. Furthermore, instructors and professors lack the luxury of time when implementing techniques such as literature circles. Most of the discussions concerning literature circles are focused on K-12 school environments, where students meet with the same teachers for a full year. University teacher personnel are faced with time limitations when striving to make students feel comfortable and engage in discussions in the classroom, especially when dealing with first year students who are experiencing a college classroom for the first time. The aforementioned factors contributed to the implementation of roles in the literature circles conducted in this study.

Given the success of literature circles in other contexts, the research questions that guided this research were:

How do literature circles influence participation in a classroom of adult ESL learners?

How does the use of Spanish (the students' first language) influence classroom discussion and reading comprehension of English texts?

## Methodology

The authors of this paper conducted all data collection for this study in a first year Basic English I course at The University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. The first author of this paper was the instructor of record for the course and the second author served as the mentor professor and conducted the focus-group interview. The primary focus of the required English course was to develop students' ability to understand written and spoken English by improving reading, writing, and speaking skills. One of the required components of the course was the assigned reading of a complete novel by all students in the course. The general course goals included being able to communicate effectively when reading, writing, and speaking in English, thinking critically, and working collaboratively with peers in small groups and as a class.

The site for this study was INGL 3101 Inglés Basico I (Basic English I), where 29 students were enrolled. Fifty-six percent of the students were male and 60 percent attended public schools prior to enrolling at the university. The majority of the class consisted of first year students aged 18-20. Furthermore, attesting to their lack of familiarity with published English texts, 44 percent of the participants indicated that they had not read a novel of more than 100 pages before enrolling in the course. After receiving institutional approval for research with human subjects, a series of field notes were taken by the instructor directly following each of the thirteen, 50-minute class periods within the novel unit, which constituted a 4-week period during the course of the semester. At the beginning of the unit, students were randomly assigned into groups of 4-5 for a total of six groups, where they would work throughout the literature circles. After time was provided for group work in literature circles, the class would often reconvene as a whole to share and discuss their progress and opinions on the assigned chapter.

In addition to the small group and whole group discussion formats, during the final class of the week within the unit, the instructor assigned an in-class writing assignment around a reflective prompt. The first prompt asked the following question: "Which of

the characters (Boy without a flag, Nilsa, or ChaCha) do you find most sympathetic? Why? Provide details from the text to support your claim." The second prompt asked: "How does this text remind you of other texts that you've read? How is it different? Did you like it?" The third prompt read: "To what extent do an individual's social connections affect a child's development? What is the role of social connections in the lives of the children in these stories and what should its role be?" While students did not put their names on their responses, they allowed the researchers to gauge students' understanding of the assigned text and how they were making sense of it.

For the second unit of the Basic English I course, which lasted four weeks, the reading comprehension component was the reading and discussion of the novel *The Boy without a Flag* by Abraham Rodríguez Jr. Throughout the book, the author presents issues of cultural identity, class, and privilege present in the Puerto Rican community in the Bronx, New York. It is important to note that this particular novel has stand-alone chapters; each chapter deals with a different character within the same community, and only two chapters have a character that overlaps. While discussing the novel, literature circles were used as a strategy to promote discussion and critical thinking within the classroom. Before the introduction of the book, students practiced with the concept of working in groups and fulfilling a specific assigned role, though the text discussed was much shorter. When introducing the novel, students were asked to form groups of four, taking into consideration that it was important to have four members since each member would have a particular role to fulfill. Understanding the potential downsides of strict role assignments, the instructor decided to loosely assign roles, but did not assign "role sheets," heeding the recommendation of Harvey and Daniels (2009). However, the co-researchers felt that assigning roles provided extra structure and some perceived accountability on the part of the students. The different roles used consisted of Summarizers, who identified the main themes or issues in the chapter; Questioners, who developed questions to discuss; Literary Luminaries, who identified interesting passages in the text to read aloud; and Connectors, who made text-to-world and text-to-text connections. The first week, students were required to read the first chapter of

the novel and reflect on the guide questions that the instructor provided which were designed to generate ideas regarding issues they might want to discuss in a subsequent class. The questions asked students to think about whether the problems in the chapter seemed specific to Puerto Ricans living in the United States, or whether they could be applied to other ethnic groups, and to think about the relationships between the parents and the children in the story. Every group dealt with the same guide questions for the first chapter so they would get a sense of the depth of discussion that was expected in subsequent literature circles when they would not be given guide questions and would have the liberty to discuss the themes most relevant to their group. The discussion within the groups was informal and students were observed to be primarily using Spanish within their literature circle.

The second week, students were not provided with guide questions and were required to present the material they produced within their literature circle, focusing on chapter two rather than chapter one. They were provided time to discuss the chapter and identify what they would present in the subsequent class, which had to be in English. This was done in an attempt to relieve pressure before their informal presentation in front of the whole class. During the chapter two presentations to the entire class, students seemed to focus on superficial aspects of the story, based on the plot points rather than reflection on the significance or implications of what they read. This, however, was not the case when they were provided the guide questions in chapter one. As a result, in the second class (of three) during week two of the unit, the instructor decided to go back and demonstrate the depth of analysis and connection making that she was expecting. In so doing, the instructor guided students in the formulation of questions, text-to-world connections, and summaries, as well as the selection of important quotes. Subsequently, the class worked together to better understand chapter two. It was only after scaffolding and demonstrating for the students in chapters one and two that students seemed to grasp that they were required to focus on substantive themes in the book's content and its applicability or relevance to their context and not on specific plot points which had been the expectation and focus of much of their secondary education.

After the demonstration in chapter two, groups were assigned different chapters to explore using literature circles, and at the end of the unit, they were assigned a formal presentation, with the added instruction of making connections between their chapter and their reading of the rest of the book.

## *Data Collection*

### *Field Notes*

Throughout the novel unit, the instructor of record was an active participant and researcher. After each of the thirteen class sessions, she would go back to the small list of notes that she was able to take while teaching. Throughout the lessons, she facilitated large group discussions and also sat in on all of the literature circles at different times. Her field notes focused specifically on students' participation and their engagement in the required reading and class discussion. She also paid special attention to how students reacted to the various themes presented in the novel. The instructor of record and the mentoring researcher met on a weekly basis to discuss the field notes and identify any reoccurring tendencies displayed in the literature circles along with aspects of the unit that were going well and other aspects that could be improved.

### *Reflective Prompts*

As part of the course, students were required to hand in three reflective prompts throughout the novel unit (see above for specific prompts). These prompts encouraged students to make text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text connections. Students were allowed to use Spanish to answer the prompts if they so chose. This was done as a means for the instructor to assess reading comprehension and encourage students to write more. Excerpts including students' grammatical errors and overlap of Spanish and English will be used to demonstrate the different levels of English proficiency in the classroom.

### *Focus Group Interview*

The focus group interview was conducted after the unit ended, and participation was strictly voluntary. The second author, who had not previously met the

students, conducted the interviews in Spanish and at times in English. In total, five students participated in an hour-long audio-recorded interview of which the transcript was immediately transcribed. In order to protect students' anonymity, the instructor of the course was not provided the focus group data until after final grades had been submitted.

The focus group interview used semi-structured interview questions that were organized to confirm or disconfirm the instructor's observations and preliminary analysis of the reflective prompts. The focus group also addressed some of the issues presented in the novel, i.e. class, race, and privilege, and the use of Spanish in the classroom. While only five students participated, their participation allowed the researchers to triangulate their findings and served as an extra layer of confirmation that their analysis was in line with what the students felt was happening through the use of the literature circles.

### Questionnaire

Students were asked to fill out a questionnaire at the end of the unit. The questionnaire asked students' age; whether they attended private schools, public schools, or both; if they read a 100 page novel in English prior to the course; and whether they read a little, some, or most of the book assigned to them for the course. The answers of the questionnaire were meant to provide background information regarding students' schooling and literacy experiences with the English language, and were collected on condition of anonymity.

### Data Analysis

The three types of data collected for this research were all analyzed through multiple readings of the field notes and weekly collaborative discussions about the data. Ultimately, through various readings of the field notes and reflective prompts, preliminary emergent themes were identified and later confirmed through additional observation and the focus group interview. The three most salient themes (i.e. community building/participation, relevance, and using student's first language) will be addressed in the subsequent section.

## Results

### Community Building/Participation

Throughout the observations of the unit, it was obvious that students were collaborating and participating to a greater extent than they had in previous units.

Students participated more than they had previously in the semester. Though at times I had to prompt them and they often answered in Spanish, giving students a particular role for the discussion and providing them time to prepare their answers seemed to make them feel comfortable enough to share their work in class and enable an exchange of ideas. (Field Notes October 25, 2013)

This observation was corroborated in the focus group interview as well where participants indicated that although they themselves had participated in class discussions since the beginning of the semester, literature circles gave others "*la oportunidad de poder expresarse*" (the opportunity to express themselves). When asked how they perceived an increase in participation, one student commented that the classroom had seemed divided between the talkative section and a "dark corner." After implementing literature circles, one student pointed out that those in the "dark corner" were participating:

Es que al principio, por lo menos como la esqui...por lo menos como te había dicho, que había la fila que se pasaba participando y la otra que era como que el lado oscuro, y estas últimas clases se veía como el lado oscuro hablaba.

It's just that at the beginning...there was a row that kept participating and the other one was like the dark side, and in those last classes you could see how the dark side spoke. (Focus group, November 22, 2013)

Participants in the focus group attributed this increase in participation to the group work required

in literature circles, since every member was assigned a different role and students were forced to exchange ideas with their peers as part of the exercise:

*Analizamos [la novela] entre todos, porque hacíamos grupitos...y pues ahí... teníamos la oportunidad de ver los puntos de vista de los otros, compartir la información, 'Ah sí, yo vi que esto y esto pues afectó de esta manera' y pues, podíamos pues intercambiar ideas y eso.*

We analyzed [the novel] between all of us because we made little groups, and then we had the opportunity to see others' point of view, share information, 'Oh yeah, I saw this and this had such and such effect' and we could exchange ideas. (Focus group, November 22, 2013)

Another student commented:

*Practicamos todas las funciones. O sea, no fue que una persona nada más se dedicó a resumir... y se notaba verdad, que algunos sabían resumir mejor que otros, conectar mejor que otros, pero todos tuvieron la oportunidad de hacerlo.*

We practiced all the roles. I mean, it wasn't that one person alone dedicated themselves to summarizing... and you could tell, right, that some knew how to summarize better than others, make connections better than others, but everyone had the opportunity to do it. (Focus group, November 22, 2013)

Furthermore, students felt that the group dynamic helped in terms of community building:

*Hay personas que ofrecieron historias personales porque hablaban de la sexualidad, de la violencia doméstica, de economía... de las drogas y pues, nos unió. Así conocíamos quiénes eran nuestros compañeros. No eran unos extraños como al principio.*

There are people that shared personal stories about sexuality, domestic violence, the economy...

drugs, and well, it united us. That's how we met our classmates. They weren't strangers like at the beginning. (Focus group, November 22, 2013)

The observations and the data from the focus group consistently signaled the important role that the literature circles had in promoting community building and participation among classmates.

## Relevancy

In the context of academia, relevancy or relevance has been defined as students' ability to connect course material to their own needs and goals. According to Frymier and Shulman (1995), such ability is directly connected to one's life experiences and prior knowledge. Students in the focus group attributed the increase in participation to the content of the book and the themes it brought up, which lent themselves to connections with students' lives. One participant pointed out that "*no era simplemente resumir si no también conectar con la vida diaria y ahí ya tu podías expresarte*" (it wasn't simply summarizing, it was making connections with real life and then you could express yourself), pointing out that connecting the themes in the book with their lives gave the students the opportunity of expressing themselves. According to the questionnaire that was administered at the end of the unit to the whole class, 76 percent of the students reported they had read most of the book, while only 16 percent indicated that they read it from start to finish. Despite the fact that only 16 percent indicated they read the whole book from cover to cover, it was obvious throughout the observations as well as in the focus group that as the chapters presented problems that the students could relate to, such as unwanted pregnancies, drug problems, and families with absent parental figures, student participation increased even more.

When asked to make text-to-text connections in one reflective prompt, many students commented they had never read a book that presented similar social issues and reflected such realistic problems. One student commented: "It reminds me of the news that we see every day about the Latino people in the United States, how they *enfrent* (from Spanish *enfrentar*, meaning to cope or deal with)

there problems and how society puts them in a bad position" (Reflective prompt 24, November 22, 2013). They also commented on the fact that the characters talked like real people and that each chapter was a different story, which some students enjoyed because it kept them interested, focused, and motivated while reading the novel. One student, referring to the book, wrote in his response: "I like it because it feels real and not another Cinderella story" (Reflective prompt 23, November 22, 2013). One student mentioned in his response that he found the book "modern," and very different to what he was accustomed to reading in his high school English classes. Another student commented that he enjoyed the discussions on the novel because they reminded him of his social science classes: "The topics have connections with [a sociology text] because it talks about poverty, family, bad decisions, and other stratification classes that involve (involve) puertorrican's thinking and culture" (Reflective prompt 20, November 22, 2013). This sentiment appeared throughout the written reflections dealing with text-to-text connections:

Lo que he leído se relaciona con artículos que hablan sobre estos problemas de la juventud, que si están teniendo relaciones a temprana edad, que usan drogas y que algunos viven en pobreza y esto es lo que los impulsa a tomar estas acciones...[los cuentos] te hacen reflexionar en cómo estamos viviendo y cómo podemos hacer para mejorar esto y salir adelante.

What I've read is related to articles that talk about these issues relating to youth, that they are having sexual relationships at a young age, that they use drugs, and that some of them live in poverty, and this is what drives them to do these things...[the stories] make you reflect on how we are living and what we could do to improve this and move forward. (Reflective prompt 1, November 22, 2013)

In terms of their text-to-world connections, students wrote about what they interpreted the novel to mean when dealing with adults, children, and the role society and government institutions

have in terms of aggravating or resolving these issues. Some students argued that there are opportunities available through government aid to help those who need it, and that it is the individual's responsibility to take advantage and improve their situation. Others saw the novel as reflecting the way in which there is little chance for improving one's circumstances when one lives within a low socioeconomic status, and how the problems of the parents are then transferred to the children. This cycle of poverty, neglect, and want was a common theme of class discussions. In their response to a reflective prompt, one student concluded: "society affects children, because society affects our parents and our parents transmit that effect to us" (Reflective prompt 22, November 20, 2013).

The concept of privilege and the importance of economic and/or emotional support were also addressed by students. Some students wrote that not having support does not impede success and in some cases builds fortitude and motivation: *Puerto Rico necesita niños que sean los futuros líderes y promotores de un mejor país. El cambio no está en las instituciones religiosas y gubernamentales, sino en cada individuo* (Puerto Rico needs children who will become future leaders and promoters of a better nation. Change is not found within religious or government institutions, but within each individual) (Reflective prompt 16, November 20, 2013). Furthermore, other students reflected on the importance of the novel in their own lives. One student commented that she felt guilty because she had made many mistakes while having the support and financial means that others do not. Students also pointed out connections between poor education, government support, and limited choices to an inability and unwillingness to progress, ultimately harming society in general: *"Vemos como el gobierno beneficia más a personas con buenos recursos económicos, mientras la clase pobre se convierte en un grupo de personas marginadas...le sueltan una alternativa de vida. ¿Qué creamos?"* (We see how the government benefits people with economic resources more, while the poor becomes a group of marginalized people...they are given one alternative regarding their lives. What are we creating?) (Reflective prompt 5, November 20, 2013).

In terms of text-to-self connections, most students readily identified with the cultural identity issues reflected in the first chapter, indicating that the boy's divided loyalty between the United States and Puerto Rico was something that most of them could identify with as members of an ideologically divided household. One student wrote:

This is typical for all these Puerto Ricans that born in the United States. I think that is difficult to think, to know which is your nation, to feel that awesome feeling when you hear the sound of the *himno* and see the flag and be proud of where you came from. Those who [were] born in the United States or move to the United States when they are little and the parents are from here, they don't remember or don't care where they came from. I really like this kid, because at the beginning of the story, he was like the others, but then something on him change, that feeling of *patriotismo*. (Reflective prompt 29, November 6, 2013)

Other students mentioned the issues of peer-pressure and the strong presence of negative influences as factors they could sympathize with in terms of the characters. Although very few students wrote about personal experiences similar to those encountered by the characters in the novel, several mentioned friends or family members who had experienced similar situations, and the vast majority found an element they could sympathize with:

One day suddenly my best friend change[d] with me and she was keeping things from me, all because she had a boyfriend and he told her to be away from me and all her friends...I understand Nilsa (a character in the story) because she was left behind just like I was. Nilsa wanted to change so ChaCha (her best friend) will pay attention to her, and that's not right...This same friend I was talking about its pregnant right now and it's really sad because her boyfriend it's a drug dealer too. It's almost the same case. (Reflective prompt 2, November 6, 2013)

Students lived connections to the characters and the themes of *The Boy Without a Flag* made reading relevant to their own experiences as late adolescents living in Puerto Rico.

### Using students' first language

Students used Spanish while participating in informal discussions within their literature circles, as evidenced by the field notes taken when the instructor sat in on their discussions. The fact that students were allowed to use Spanish in informal discussions and while writing their prompts could be another factor influencing the increase in participation, as documented in the field notes, the length of students' responses for the written reflections, and their comments in the focus group. Writing assignments at the beginning of the semester produced responses of just a few sentences or half a page at most; however, when allowed to write responses in their first language, several students went beyond the half-page minimum, handing in as much as three or four pages. Spanish was used in other ways as well; for example, the instructor repeated instructions in Spanish to ensure student comprehension. Furthermore, students summoned the instructor during informal discussions within literature circles to ask questions in Spanish and write down instructions in Spanish, even if their completed work was written in English later on (Field notes, October 23, 2013). It is important to note that the language students used to write the reflective prompts in this unit varied widely; some students chose to write in English, others chose Spanish, and others chose to write mainly in English but used Spanish to write phrases or finish sentences they did not know how to complete in English. Participants in the focus group indicated that the use of Spanish in the classroom served as a bridge to the English language, and that mixing both languages helped them achieve a level of communication that relying on the target language alone would not have afforded: "...*si yo empiezo hablando español y luego hablo inglés y lo practico y lo mezclo, yo mismo voy a crear esto de como que ...mira...me salió.*" (if I start speaking Spanish and then I speak in English and I practice and mix it, I will create this myself and I'll be like...look...it turned out) (Focus group, November 22, 2013). When asked whether using their first language proved to be an advantage in the classroom, students participating in the focus group answered in the affirmative; when asked how they found the use of their first language helpful,

one student answered “*en poder expresarse mejor*” (in being better able to express yourself) while another student answered “*Fue mejor...más participación*” (it was better...more participation) (Focus group, November 22, 2013).

## Discussion

Literature circles proved to be successful in terms of opening up dialogue in a classroom where students previously felt uncomfortable using their second language. Earlier in the semester some students hesitated when speaking because they felt their English was not good enough for a college English class. However, according to the focus group participants, in the literature circles, students had several advantages that motivated their participation. The first factor was the content of the book they were assigned to read. Freeman and Freeman (2002) argue that the goal of an effective, supportive teacher is to structure classroom activities in a way that bridges learner gaps, and that one way of doing so is to create a more personal, effective learning environment by connecting students’ background and context to their teaching. *The Boy Without a Flag* provided issues and questions most of the students identified as not having been discussed in their previous language classes. Furthermore, the themes presented in the book were relevant to the students’ context, and as such generated a lot of comments, questions, and suggestions. Choosing readings that connected to the students’ backgrounds served as a way for students to engage in using language in ‘meaningful and authentic’ manner while encouraging self-reflection (Kim, 2005). This relevancy of the content, supported by the assignment of roles and the collaboration necessary when working within literature circles, promoted community building; students had the opportunity to exchange their ideas with the members of their group and make sense of the material and their own experiences as a group.

Another advantage that literature circles provided for students regarding participation was a certain level of autonomy and flexibility. While the instructor demonstrated the roles each student would have and worked to engage the class in

discussion during the first two chapters, such guidance allowed students to work on their own to formulate their own questions, participate in dialogue with their groups and prepare their own responses. Nevertheless, it was essential for the instructor to inform and clearly state expectations for the students before they were required to produce material. Participants in the focus group pointed out the quality of the presentations that each group made and remarked on how surprised they were at the points and questions that literature circles produced: “...Y también las preguntas, las preguntas que surgían, había veces que tú te quedabas como que ‘Dios mío, de dónde sacaron esa pregunta’” (And also the questions, the questions that came up, there were times when you were like ‘God, where did they get that question?’) (Focus group, November 22, 2013). The participants’ surprise at the quality of the work produced highlights the potential for excellent work when students feel comfortable in their classroom and are challenged to work on their own and make connections to their own world. The use of literature circles can change the role of the teacher from one of absolute authority to that of a facilitator.

According to the field notes and focus group interview, another element that may have increased participation in the classroom discussions is the use of Spanish to reflect and discuss issues within students’ literature circles. Allowing students to work among themselves provided a low-risk learning environment in the classroom; instead of waiting for random, on-the-spot questions were students would not feel comfortable answering in their second language, literature circles opened up discussion within the small groups and required the participation of all group members. This gave students the chance to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and engage in collaborative scaffolding within a small group of peers before venturing their answers in English to the class in general. Similarly, Alegría de la Colina and Del Pilar García Mayo (2009) argue that the first language can provide cognitive support for focusing attention and understanding meaning, thus enabling fruitful interaction and collaboration between participants and facilitating the pursuit of a common goal. Students in this study were not discouraged from using Spanish

while discussing the novel within literature circles, and participants pointed out that Spanish served as a bridge that helped them communicate their thoughts and clarify any doubts they might have had in a way that the target language alone would not have. The use of the native language also helped the instructor gauge reading comprehension, since students volunteered more details and observations when allowed to express their points of view in Spanish or a mixture of Spanish and English.

Literature circles can be modified in many different ways to suit the needs of the students and course objectives. Future research on their implementation in college-level Basic English classrooms can include using literature circles without incorporating roles to explore how the absence of such may impact student participation and the process of inquiry. Furthermore, using literature circles as a means to facilitate the completion of final projects such as plays, songs, poems, or videos will allow the exploration of the effectiveness of literature circles when ESL students are working towards a goal and are able to have more freedom and creative agency. Additionally, the use of film adaptations related to in-class readings can be implemented in ESL classrooms to explore how meaning facilitates the reading process. Finally, incorporating reflective assignments recording ESL students' experiences in literature groups would be valuable for both researchers as well as students, since they would be able to gain a sense of self-awareness in terms of the collaboration process and the practice of mediating meaning (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996).

## Conclusions

Within the context described above, literature circles provided many advantages to college ESL students. The strategy used in this study offered students the environment they needed to feel secure when participating in the classroom by coupling a text that facilitated class discussion with a strategy that required collaboration. Bringing topics that students can connect to promoted self-reflection and collaborative work, since students analyzed and

shared experiences in order to negotiate meaning. Although the assigned roles required group work and discussion, providing a topic of common interest helped increase the already established communication between peers, since most students felt that they had something to contribute to the conversation. By using collaborative work, students could share ownership in terms of ideas and work produced, making them feel more comfortable participating in an ESL classroom.

Another advantage that literature circles provided was the opportunity for students to use their first language within their small groups. Using Spanish allowed students to clarify their questions and concerns as well as engage in collaborative inquiry to articulate their arguments using the target language. In short, literature circles provided these students with the opportunity to read, write, and speak in English while using their first language as a cognitive tool, encouraging language acquisition while simultaneously opening up the language classroom to discussions that were relevant to students' own lives.

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