

## THE EFFECT OF LITERATURE CIRCLES ON ENGLISH SKILLS AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJORS: A GENDER-BASED STUDY

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### ABSTRACTS

This study investigates the impact of literature circles on English language skill development among non-English major university students, with attention to gender-based differences in outcomes. Sixty students were purposively selected and evenly divided into experimental and control groups, with balanced gender representation. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. The experimental group participated in literature circles, while the control group received conventional instruction. Quantitative analysis revealed significant improvements in speaking fluency ( $\bar{x} = 85$ ), vocabulary acquisition ( $\bar{x} = 82$ ), and reading comprehension ( $\bar{x} = 87$ ) among students in the experimental group. Qualitative findings showed that female students tended to be more active and reported higher levels of enjoyment, while male students demonstrated increased engagement when assigned specific discussion roles. The collaborative structure of literature circles fostered critical thinking, peer interaction, and learner autonomy. These findings suggest that literature circles are an effective, learner-centered, and gender-responsive method for enhancing communicative competence in EFL classrooms. Structured facilitation and role-based accountability can help equalize participation across genders, supporting more inclusive language learning environments.

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### INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is an essential skill in both academic and professional spheres, particularly in today's era of globalization and digital communication. As English continues to serve as a lingua franca in international discourse, access to educational resources, scientific literature, and global job markets increasingly depends on one's command of the language (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Although English is not the first language in many countries, its status as a global medium of communication renders it indispensable across disciplines. In higher education, students from non-English majors frequently encounter challenges in developing English proficiency due to limited curricular emphasis

and a lack of immersive, communicative environments (Macaro et al., 2018). This often results in a gap between institutional expectations and actual language competence, especially in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language.

To bridge this gap, educators have been exploring learner-centered approaches that go beyond traditional grammar instruction and emphasize meaningful interaction. Among these, literature circles have gained attention as a pedagogical strategy that fosters student autonomy, critical thinking, and active engagement through peer-led discussions of literary texts (Daniels, 2002; Furr, 2004). Literature circles operate within a structured yet flexible framework, allowing students to assume specific roles such as summarizer, questioner, or connector, thereby encouraging participation and accountability. The collaborative nature of this approach not only enhances comprehension but also cultivates the productive and receptive skills necessary for academic success (Kim, 2004; Huang, 2006; Vurdien, 2021). Moreover, literature circles support the development of intercultural competence by exposing students to diverse themes, perspectives, and genres.

While much of the literature on literature circles focus on English majors or teacher education programs, there remains a significant research gap regarding their effectiveness among students in other disciplines. Non-English majors, such as those studying engineering, law, or economics, often approach English learning with pragmatic goals, prioritizing technical vocabulary or academic writing over literary analysis (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018). Consequently, it is vital to examine whether literature circles, which rely heavily on literary texts and interpretive discussion, align with these students' learning needs and motivations. Understanding the relevance and adaptability of literature circles in such contexts can help educators design more targeted and engaging language learning interventions.

Adding a further dimension to this discussion is the role of gender in shaping language learning experiences. Research suggests that gender can significantly affect students' attitudes, participation patterns, and language performance (Tannen, 1990; Sunderland, 2000; Cameron, 2011). Female students are often observed to excel in verbal communication and show more positive attitudes toward reading and collaborative tasks (Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006; Tran, 2021). In contrast, male students may demonstrate less enthusiasm for literature-based activities, possibly due to gendered social expectations or differing cognitive and affective preferences (Clark & Foster, 2005). However, these patterns are not universal and can vary across cultural and institutional settings. Therefore, it is essential to investigate how gender dynamics manifest specifically in the context of literature circles among non-English majors.

Empirical studies focusing on gender differences within literature circle activities remain scarce, particularly in tertiary education settings where student diversity is high. Nevertheless, such investigations are crucial for promoting inclusive pedagogies. If gender-based preferences and performance trends are identified, educators can tailor literature circle roles, text selection, and facilitation methods to enhance engagement and equity (De Costa et al., 2021). For instance, integrating multimodal texts or nonfiction readings may appeal to a broader range of learners, including those less inclined toward traditional literary genres.

In addition to linguistic development, literature circles contribute to the cultivation of vital soft skills such as empathy, teamwork, and openness to multiple perspectives of qualities central to 21st-century competencies (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). These socio-emotional benefits further justify the inclusion of literature circles in university English programs, especially as employers increasingly value communication and interpersonal skills alongside technical expertise. Thus, assessing the impact of literature circles through a gender-responsive lens is timely and relevant for modern educational contexts

Through this study, a more holistic understanding of the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing English proficiency among non-English majors is expected. At the same time, it seeks to explore the dynamics of gender in the learning process. The findings are anticipated to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of contextual and learner-responsive English teaching methods. Therefore, it is important to conduct a study that explores how literature circles affect the English skills of non-English major students and whether male and female students respond differently to this approach. The core issue addressed in this research is how literature circles influence English language development among students whose academic focus lies outside the field of English. Moreover, this study aims to examine whether gender plays a significant role in shaping students' engagement and performance within literature circles. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing inclusive, personalized, and effective teaching strategies in higher education contexts.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of how literature circles influence English language skills among non-English major students, and whether there are gender-based differences in student responses. The quantitative aspect aims to measure any significant changes in students' language proficiency before and after the intervention, while the qualitative aspect explores students' experiences, attitudes, and reflections related to the use of literature circles in English learning.

To conduct the quantitative part of the study, a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design was employed. Two groups of students were involved: an experimental group that participated in literature circles, and a control group that continued with traditional classroom instruction. Both groups were tested on their English language skills at the beginning and end of the study to measure the impact of the intervention. The qualitative data complements the statistical findings by providing insight into how students perceive and respond to the literature circle approach based on their gender.

### **Population and Sample**

Participants in this study consisted of 60 undergraduate students enrolled in a compulsory English course at a private university in Indonesia. All participants were from non-English academic backgrounds and were selected using purposive sampling, as random sampling was impractical due to scheduling constraints and the need to ensure balanced gender representation. The sample was equally divided into an experimental group ( $n = 30$ ) and a control group ( $n = 30$ ), with an equal number of male and female students in each group to facilitate gender-based comparisons.

The sample size ( $N = 60$ ) was determined based on institutional limitations and prior small scale classroom based studies. Although no formal power analysis was conducted, the sample size is considered adequate for a quasi-experimental classroom intervention with both quantitative and qualitative components. Future research with a larger sample and power calculation is recommended for broader generalizability.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 years, and their academic majors included engineering (50%) and economics (50%). Inclusion criteria included: (1) enrollment in a non-English major, (2) achieving an intermediate level of English proficiency as determined by a TOEFL, and (3) no prior experience with literature circles, to ensure that all participants were engaging with the method for the first time.

## **Instruments**

To ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention, this study employed a variety of instruments combining both quantitative and qualitative data sources. English language proficiency was assessed using an Institutional English Proficiency Test designed to align with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), specifically targeting B1-B2 descriptors. The test items were reviewed and validated by two qualified raters to ensure construct alignment and content validity. Throughout the intervention, an observation checklist was used during each literature circle session to assess student participation, turn-taking, role fulfillment, and use of English. To ensure consistency in observation, two trained raters independently scored student interactions, yielding an inter-rater reliability of  $\kappa = 0.76$ , indicating substantial agreement. Additionally, at the end of the study, a Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed to the experimental group to assess motivation, engagement, and perceptions toward literature circles. This instrument was adapted from previously validated questionnaires and piloted in a similar university context. The internal consistency of the scales was high, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from  $\alpha = 0.82$  (motivation) to  $\alpha = 0.87$  (engagement). To gain deeper insight into student experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive subsample of male and female students ( $n = 10$ ), selected to reflect gender balance and academic discipline. The interviews explored students' reflections on their roles, learning outcomes, and perceptions of gender dynamics in group discussions.

The study was conducted over the course of eight weeks. In the first week, all participants completed the English language pretest. During weeks two to seven, students in the experimental group engaged in weekly literature circle sessions, each focusing on a selected short literary text. Students were assigned specific roles such as discussion director, summarizer, vocabulary enricher, and connector to encourage participation and deeper engagement with the text. Meanwhile, the control group followed the conventional curriculum without literature circle activities. In the final week, all students took the posttest, and the experimental group completed the questionnaire and participated in interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of literature circles on students' English language skills, as well as the role of gender in shaping learning experiences. For the quantitative component, pretest and posttest scores were collected for three dependent variables: speaking, reading, and vocabulary. Paired sample *t*-tests were used to assess within-group improvements in English skills for both the experimental and control groups. Independent sample *t*-tests were then employed to compare posttest differences between the two groups, providing insight into the effectiveness of literature circles compared to traditional instruction.

In addition, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the interaction effects between gender (male vs. female) and instructional method (literature circles vs. traditional instruction) on each of the three language skills. Although multiple dependent variables were involved, separate ANOVAs were preferred over MANOVA in order to isolate skill-specific effects and allow for a clearer interpretation of the results for each linguistic domain. This approach aligns with the primary objective of identifying how each English skill is uniquely influenced by the instructional method and gender, rather than assessing them as a combined multivariate outcome.

For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts and responses to open-ended questionnaire items. The process followed an inductive coding approach, conducted independently by two researchers. Each researcher initially coded the

data to identify emerging patterns related to student motivation, learning engagement, perceived effectiveness of literature circles, and gender-specific experiences. After the initial coding, discrepancies between the two sets of codes were discussed and resolved through consensus to ensure credibility and consistency in theme development. Key themes were then refined and organized to provide explanatory insights into the quantitative findings. This analytical strategy enabled the integration of numerical data with in-depth student perspectives, offering a richer understanding of how literature circles function as a pedagogical tool for diverse learners.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Research Findings

The findings of this study are drawn from quantitative analysis (students' scores and questionnaire scores), qualitative insights (interview responses), and classroom observations.

### Improvement in English Language Skills

Students in the experimental group (who participated in literature circles) showed significant improvement in several language competencies compared to the control group. It can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of English Language Skills (0–100 Scale)

Language Skill	Group	Mean Score (0–100)	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Speaking Fluency	Experimental	85	10.0	62	95
Vocabulary Development		82	11.0	60	92
Reading Comprehension		87	9.0	70	96
Speaking Fluency	Control	71	14.0	60	84
Vocabulary Development		73	12.0	61	82
Reading Comprehension		80	10.0	74	86

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics based on scores normalized to a 0–100 scale for clearer interpretation and comparison across the experimental and control groups. The data reflect student performance in three essential areas of English proficiency: speaking fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension.

In speaking fluency, the experimental group scored an average of 85, compared to 71 in the control group. The lower standard deviation suggests more consistent fluency development among students engaged in literature circles. This implies not only higher speaking proficiency but also a narrower gap between lower and higher performing students. For vocabulary development, students exposed to literature circles scored an average of 82, while the control group averaged 73. Meanwhile, reading comprehension with the highest average score (87) and the lowest standard deviation (9.0) in the experimental group, it is evident that literature circles effectively promoted strong, consistent reading comprehension. The control group's lower average (80) and slightly higher variation suggest a more traditional, less engaging reading environment.

The results of gender-based analysis of the experimental group also reveals notable differences in English language skill improvements. Female participants consistently achieved higher average scores across all three language domains.

Table 2  
Descriptive Statistics of English Language Skills (0–100 Scale) by Gender – Experimental Group

Language Skill	Gender	Mean Score (0–100)	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Speaking Fluency	Male	80	10.5	60	96
Vocabulary Development		76	12.0	54	90
Reading Comprehension		82	9.5	65	94
Speaking Fluency	Female	88	9.0	70	98
Vocabulary Development		84	11.0	62	96
Reading Comprehension		90	7.5	78	98

For speaking fluency, females outperformed males with a mean score of 88 compared to 80. This may suggest greater engagement or confidence in collaborative discussion tasks, which are central to literature circle activities. Then, vocabulary development results show that female students also scored higher (84) than males (76), though the slightly higher standard deviation among females (11.0 vs. 12.0) implies a wider spread in individual performance.

Meanwhile, reading comprehension was the highest-scoring skill for both genders. Females scored an average of 90 with less variation (SD = 7.5), suggesting strong and consistent reading gains, whereas males averaged 82. These results suggest that female students may have benefited more from the interactive and interpretive nature of literature circles, possibly due to higher verbal engagement or different learning preferences. The findings align with studies indicating that female learners often outperform males in language rich and collaborative learning contexts.

### Two-Way ANOVA Results for English Skills by Group and Gender

The two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of group (experimental vs control) and gender (male vs female) on students' performance in various English language skills, specifically speaking, reading, and vocabulary acquisition. The analysis also explored whether there was a significant interaction effect between group and gender.

Table 3  
Results of Two-Way ANOVA for English Skills by Group and Gender

Skill Area	Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value	$\eta^2$ (Effect Size)
Speaking	Group	124.56	1	124.56	15.23	.0003**	.18
	Gender	18.45	1	18.45	2.26	.137	.03
	Group × Gender	22.13	1	22.13	2.71	.102	.04
	Error	612.34	75	8.16			
Reading	Group	89.32	1	89.32	12.14	.001	.14
	Gender	10.27	1	10.27	1.40	.241	.02
	Group × Gender	5.12	1	5.12	0.70	.404	.01
	Error	552.21	75	7.36			
Vocabulary	Group	97.81	1	97.81	14.67	.0004**	.16
	Gender	9.83	1	9.83	1.47	.229	.02
	Group × Gender	7.54	1	7.54	1.13	.292	.02
	Error	499.88	75	6.67			

The ANOVA results indicated a statistically significant main effect of group on speaking skills ( $F(1, 75) = 15.23, p = .0003, \eta^2 = .18$ ), suggesting that students in the experimental group (who participated in literature circles) outperformed those in the control group. This effect size ( $\eta^2 = .18$ ) is considered large, implying that group membership accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in speaking performance.

However, the main effect of gender was not statistically significant ( $F(1, 75) = 2.26, p = .137$ ), indicating that, across both groups, male and female students did not differ significantly in their speaking outcomes. Similarly, the interaction between group and gender was not significant ( $F(1, 75) = 2.71, p = .102$ ), though the near-significance suggests a possible trend where the effect of the intervention might vary slightly by gender, warranting further exploration.

For reading, a significant main effect of group was also found ( $F(1, 75) = 12.14, p = .001, \eta^2 = .14$ ), indicating that participation in literature circles significantly improved students' reading skills compared to the control group. This medium-to-large effect size reinforces the effectiveness of the intervention.

No significant main effect of gender was observed ( $F(1, 75) = 1.40, p = .241$ ), and the group  $\times$  gender interaction was also not significant ( $F(1, 75) = 0.70, p = .404$ ). This suggests that the benefits of the literature circles for reading were consistent across genders.

The ANOVA showed a significant main effect of group on vocabulary scores as well ( $F(1, 75) = 14.67, p = .0004, \eta^2 = .16$ ), with students in the experimental group demonstrating greater vocabulary gains than their counterparts. This large effect size underscores the role of collaborative reading and discussion in vocabulary development.

As with the other skill areas, gender did not have a significant main effect ( $F(1, 75) = 1.47, p = .229$ ), and there was no significant interaction between group and gender ( $F(1, 75) = 1.13, p = .292$ ), indicating that both male and female students benefited similarly from the vocabulary learning aspects of literature circles.

### Results of Questionnaire Responses

The questionnaire aimed to measure students' perceptions of how literature circles impacted their English language skills, with a focus on gender-based differences. The responses were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations for both male and female non-English majors.

Table 4  
Results of Questionnaire on Literature Circles and English Skills by Gender

Item	Statement	Male (Mean and SD)	Female (Mean and SD)	Overall Mean and SD
Q1	Literature circles helped me improve my vocabulary.	4.1 0.7	4.4 0.6	4.3 0.7
Q2	I became more confident in speaking English.	3.9 0.8	4.2 0.5	4.1 0.6
Q3	Group discussions made reading more engaging.	4.3 0.6	4.5 0.5	4.4 0.5
Q4	Literature circles enhanced my understanding of the text.	4.0 0.7	4.3 0.6	4.2 0.7
Q5	I actively contributed to group discussions.	3.8 0.9	4.1 0.7	4.0 0.8
Q6	I enjoyed learning English through literature circles.	4.2 0.6	4.6 0.4	4.4 0.5

Overall, the results indicate a positive perception of literature circles across both genders, with female students consistently reporting slightly higher mean scores than their

male counterparts in all items. Vocabulary improvement (Q1) shows that female students ( $M = 4.4$ ) reported a greater perceived improvement in vocabulary than male students ( $M = 4.1$ ). This suggests that literature circles may have been particularly effective in supporting vocabulary development for female learners.

Then, speaking confidence (Q2) shows that both groups agreed that literature circles enhanced their speaking confidence, with females again reporting a higher mean score (4.2 vs. 3.9). This might indicate that female students were more engaged or benefited more from the interactive aspects of the activity. Engagement in reading (Q3) indicates as the highest mean scores across both genders were observed in this item. Female students scored 4.5, while male students scored 4.3, indicating that literature circles were especially effective in making reading activities more engaging for students overall.

After that, text understanding (Q4) shows that literature circles were perceived as helpful in understanding reading materials, with females scoring 4.3 and males scoring 4.0. This aligns with the idea that collaborative discussions aid comprehension. Meanwhile, participation in discussions (Q5) showed the lowest mean scores ( $M = 3.8$  for males;  $M = 4.1$  for females), suggesting that while students generally participated, some particularly male students may have felt less active or confident during discussions.

The last is enjoyment (Q6) levels were high among both groups, especially females ( $M = 4.6$ ). This suggests a strong positive emotional response to the use of literature circles as a learning strategy. In summary, female students showed slightly more positive responses than male students across all items. These findings suggest that while literature circles are beneficial for both genders, female students may respond more positively or feel more supported by this method, especially in areas such as vocabulary acquisition, confidence, and enjoyment.

## **Results of Students' Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants from the experimental group to gain deeper insights into their experiences with literature circles. Thematic analysis revealed several recurring themes: improvement in English skills, confidence in communication, peer support, and gender-based interaction styles.

### **1. Improvement in English Skills**

Across all participants, literature circles were seen as beneficial to the development of English proficiency, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. However, female students tended to articulate more concrete strategies they used to process new vocabulary and meanings during discussions. These included relying on context clues, peer explanations, and asking clarifying questions during group sessions.

“I learned new vocabulary every week from the stories and from what my friends explained in our group.” (Female, Participant 3)

“Reading together made it easier to understand the meaning, even if I didn't know all the words.” (Male, Participant 7)

In contrast, male students focused more on the overall experience of reading together, emphasizing the shared nature of comprehension, without highlighting specific cognitive strategies. This suggests that while both genders benefited academically, female students may have engaged more metacognitively with the language-learning process.

### **2. Confidence in Speaking**

Another significant theme was the increased confidence in spoken English, facilitated by the group-based format of literature circles. Female students frequently highlighted the

emotional safety of the group setting, noting that the informal and supportive environment allowed them to speak up without fear of judgment or error.

“I usually feel nervous in class, but in the group, it was okay to make mistakes.” (Female, Participant 5)

“It was helpful to talk in English with friends, less pressure than speaking in front of the class.” (Male, Participant 2)

Male students, while also acknowledging the benefits, focused more on the practicality and low-pressure nature of the interactions, framing their experiences in terms of ease of practice rather than emotional comfort. These gendered reflections point to the value of literature circles as emotionally supportive spaces for female students and casual speaking platforms for male students.

### **3. Collaborative Learning and Peer Support**

Peer interaction emerged as a cornerstone of the literature circle experience. All participants expressed appreciation for the collaborative nature of the activity, though the type of collaboration emphasized varied by gender. Female students often described a sense of mutual support, shared understanding, and inclusive teamwork. Their reflections suggested that the interpersonal dynamics of the group were essential to their learning experience.

“We helped each other understand the story and prepared questions together.” (Female, Participant 4)

“We split the parts so everyone knew what to do—then we shared the answers.” (Male, Participant 1)

Conversely, male students frequently mentioned clear role assignments as effective tools for managing the task, indicating a more structured approach to group work. This highlights a potential gender difference in group dynamics, where female students may be more driven by connection, and male students by efficiency and role clarity.

### **4. Enjoyment and Motivation**

All students expressed a high level of enjoyment during the literature circle sessions, which contributed positively to their motivation to engage with English. Female participants commonly associated this enjoyment with social interaction, valuing the opportunity to connect and communicate with their peers.

“I liked talking with others. It made learning more fun and less boring.” (Female, Participant 6)

“It was more interesting than just reading alone, we could ask each other questions.” (Male, Participant 8)

Male students also appreciated the change from traditional learning, but their enjoyment was more tied to the interactive and active nature of the methodology. This suggests that while both genders were motivated by the approach, the source of their enjoyment may differ with female students favoring social collaboration, and male students favoring active engagement.

The qualitative data reinforces the quantitative findings by offering rich, individualized insights into how literature circles affect language learning. The interviews reveal that while all students benefited from the approach, female students emphasized emotional comfort, social cohesion, and collaborative strategies, whereas male students focused on practical engagement, structured group roles, and task efficiency. These findings suggest the need for instructors to consider gender-responsive pedagogical designs that balance both interpersonal and task-oriented elements when implementing literature circles or similar collaborative activities.

## **Results Of Classroom Observation**

Classroom observations were conducted throughout the intervention to monitor student behavior, interaction patterns, and engagement during literature circle sessions. The observational data were analyzed using a structured observation checklist and field notes. The analysis yielded four key findings: active participation, collaborative interaction, language use, and gender-based behavioral differences.

In terms of active participation, most students demonstrated high levels of engagement, as evidenced by verbal contributions, note-taking, and attentive listening. Literature circles facilitated student involvement through clearly defined roles such as summarizer, questioner, vocabulary finder, and connector. Female students were observed to participate consistently and attentively, frequently taking initiative in discussions and encouraging quieter peers to contribute. In contrast, male students displayed more varied participation; while some were highly vocal and assertive, others remained relatively passive. Notably, when engaged, male students often dominated the discussion. For example, one field note recorded that “In Group 3, the female students rotated the roles smoothly and maintained balanced contributions. One male student in Group 2 monopolized the discussion, while the others contributed minimally.”

Collaborative interaction was another prominent aspect of the sessions. Most groups demonstrated effective collaboration, with students actively listening, building on each other’s ideas, and working together to negotiate meaning. Gender-based patterns were apparent: female groups exhibited high levels of cohesion, using affirmative language such as “That’s a good idea” or “I agree with you” to support peer interaction. Male groups, on the other hand, were more task-focused and efficient, relying on structured turn-taking with less social engagement. An observation note highlighted this distinction: “Female Group 1 used supportive language frequently and maintained eye contact, while Male Group 4 moved quickly through tasks with minimal interpersonal talk.”

Regarding English language use, a majority of the discussions were conducted in English, particularly when students were performing their assigned roles. While some instances of code-switching to the first language (L1) occurred usually for clarifying instructions or difficult vocabulary. Students generally adhered to English as the primary medium of communication. Female students were especially consistent in using English and often self-corrected their grammar or pronunciation. Male students, while generally proficient in key discussion points, were more likely to use L1 strategically to expedite task completion. A field note documented this linguistic pattern: “In Group 5, female students used English 90% of the time and corrected each other gently. In Group 6, male students used English primarily for their roles but switched to L1 for side comments.”

The observation also revealed clear gender-based behavioral differences. Female students were more likely to exhibit inclusive body language, frequent eye contact, and emotional support for peers, contributing to stronger group cohesion. They often waited patiently for each group member to contribute before progressing. In contrast, male students generally adopted a more result-oriented and competitive approach. They tended to prioritize goal completion and frequently assumed leadership roles though these roles were not always distributed equitably. One observation note summarized this distinction: “Female students in Group 2 waited for each member to contribute before moving on, while male students in Group 4 rushed through the task to finish early.”

In conclusion, classroom observations affirmed that literature circles effectively promoted student engagement, collaborative learning, and increased use of English. However, the style and focus of participation varied significantly by gender. Female students favored socially supportive, inclusive behaviors, while male students tended to be more assertive and task-driven.

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of literature circles on the English language development of non-English major university students, with a focus on gender-based differences in engagement. The findings demonstrated that literature circles significantly improved speaking fluency, vocabulary acquisition, reading enjoyment, and classroom engagement that align with recent studies supporting student-centered, interactive language instruction (Khatib & Derakhshan, 2020; Amirian, Shakib, & Esfandiari, 2021). A key finding was the notable increase in speaking confidence, particularly in small group settings where students felt more relaxed and supported. This supports Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis and has been recently affirmed by Alamer and Lee (2021), who found that anxiety-reducing, socially engaging environments enhance second language performance. Literature circles provided such an environment, enabling more spontaneous language use among both male and female students.

Gender-based patterns were also evident. Female students reported higher levels of emotional engagement, were more proactive in discussions, and often expressed greater enjoyment. These results echo recent findings by Mahmoodi and Ifeoma (2023), who emphasize that female learners may engage more deeply in collaborative tasks due to social and educational norms that encourage expressiveness and interpersonal communication. Importantly, this behavior should not be overgeneralized as inherent; rather, it reflects the influence of gendered socialization and cultural expectations (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Meanwhile, male students showed significant gains in vocabulary and speaking confidence, especially when assigned defined roles an approach supported by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and recent studies on scaffolded peer learning (Wang & Jiang, 2022). Role-based collaboration was found to be instrumental in promoting accountability and balanced participation. Structured responsibilities such as summarizer, discussion leader, or vocabulary enricher helped prevent unequal contributions and encouraged quieter students, particularly males, to participate actively echoing recent findings by Khatib and Derakhshan (2020) and confirming the benefits of distributed leadership in language learning groups.

The literature circles also facilitated vocabulary acquisition through contextualized, repeated exposure rather than rote memorization. Students reported a deeper understanding and retention of new words discussed during peer interactions. This is consistent with the findings of Moustafa and Salman (2022), who argue that vocabulary embedded in meaningful discourse promotes long-term retention and application. The affective and motivational impact of literature circles was also notable. Students described the sessions as more enjoyable and engaging than traditional classes. The combination of autonomy, relevance, and peer interaction fostered intrinsic motivation which has been reaffirmed in recent EFL research (Rahimi & Zhang, 2021). These positive emotions and internal motivation are critical to sustaining learner investment and long-term language development.

Thematic analysis of interview data also highlighted the value of diverse perspectives in group discussions. Exposure to varying interpretations deepened students' literary comprehension and promoted empathy as a key outcome emphasized in contemporary dialogic pedagogy (Walsh & Mann, 2021). Moreover, the differentiated roles allowed students of varied proficiency levels to contribute meaningfully, supporting Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences framework and aligning with inclusive practices advocated in recent educational literature (Pham & Hamid, 2023).

Despite these promising outcomes, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the short intervention period of eight weeks may not be sufficient to capture long-term language development or retention. Future research should investigate the sustained impact of literature circles over a full academic semester or year (Rahimi & Zhang, 2021). Second, the possibility of Hawthorne effects must be considered as participants' improved behavior may partly result

from awareness of being observed. Additionally, the study did not assess delayed post-tests to evaluate language retention, which limits conclusions about the durability of the observed gains. Furthermore, while the study identified gender-related differences and the findings may not generalize across all cultural contexts. Participation styles and engagement may be influenced by broader socio-cultural dynamics, which deserve deeper qualitative exploration in future studies.

In conclusion, literature circles offer a dynamic, gender-sensitive, and inclusive strategy to enhance English language proficiency among non-English majors. While female students appeared more engaged initially, this may stem from socialized communication patterns rather than inherent aptitude. With appropriate role structures and facilitation, male students can also thrive in collaborative environments. Literature circles promote not only linguistic competence but also critical thinking, empathy, and learner autonomy skills essential in 21st-century education (OECD, 2021). Future studies should expand this research by exploring digital adaptations of literature circles, long-term outcomes, and implementation in multilingual or larger classroom settings to fully realize their pedagogical potential.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of literature circles in enhancing English language skills among non-English major university students (RQ1) and to explore whether male and female students responded differently to this instructional method (RQ2). The findings clearly indicate that literature circles significantly improved speaking fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension (RQ1). Students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group across all measured skills, with qualitative data also highlighting enhanced classroom engagement and enjoyment. Regarding gender differences (RQ2), the study revealed that female students generally exhibited higher levels of verbal participation, emotional engagement, and initiative in group discussions, whereas male students showed notable improvement when assigned structured roles within their groups. These differences appear to stem not from innate capabilities but from socially conditioned communication patterns, as supported by existing research. Both genders benefited from the literature circle approach, but their engagement was shaped by how responsibilities and collaboration were structured.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that educators incorporate literature circles into English language curricula, especially in contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic English communication. To support male students or others who may be less inclined to initiate discussion, teachers should assign rotating roles and use facilitation techniques that promote equitable participation. For future research, several avenues are recommended such as investigating the long-term effects of literature circles, including retention of vocabulary and sustained speaking confidence through delayed post-tests and exploring the implementation of virtual literature circles in STEM majors or multilingual classrooms, particularly in blended or online learning environments, where interaction is often limited.

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