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LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSION GROUPS REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

Traditional teacher-centered pedagogy prevails in contemporary literacy classrooms, both in first language (L1) and in second language (L2) classrooms. In these classrooms, teachers dominate most of the talk while students' voices are seldom heard. This paper points out the inherent flaws in this pedagogy, suggesting that teachers incorporate literature-based discussion groups in the classroom. The piece then compares and contrasts the various types of literature-based discussion groups and the inquiry on their impact in the classroom. The review demonstrates the advantages of implementing this pedagogy in different classrooms, while simultaneously identifying limitations of the study of literature-based discussion groups. This review reveals that more research on the academic and social impact of literature-based discussion groups is necessary.

Key Words: teacher-centered pedagogy, literacy, literature-based discussion groups

Traditional teacher-centered pedagogy prevails in contemporary literacy classrooms, both in first language (L1) and in second language (L2) classrooms (Ernst, 1994). Especially in the last decade, researchers have questioned the effectiveness of this method in literacy classrooms (Alvermann, Dillon, & O'Brien, 1987). They confirmed that in traditional teacher-centered classrooms, teachers tend to do most of the talking (Cazden, 1988; Worthy & Beck, 1995). Teachers ask the questions, decide which students will answer, whereas students respond individually and are evaluated on the basis of their answers (Wintergerst, 1994). In addition, they usually initiate text-based questions (Cazden, 1988), which often elicit short, recall answers that reveal only local

information gleaned from the texts (Owens, 1995). The answers seldom consist of students' own thoughts, reflect the richness of the content, or pose thoughtful questions for other students to ponder. In summary, students' literacy learning experiences are typically passive, rather than active (Maloch, 2002; McMahon & Goatley, 1995). In juxtaposition, a constructivist approach to literacy learning involves a dynamic interaction among students. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that knowledge is socially constructed in situations where children actively explore language and thought via social interaction with others. This sociocognitive theory highlights the importance of the social learning process and emphasizes dialogue and language as mediating cognitive growth. Similarly, Langer (1987) stated that "all learning is socially based, literacy learning is an interactive process, and cognitive behaviors are influenced by context, and affect the meanings the learners produce" (p. 11). When literacy learning is viewed in this manner, literacy activity has become a sociocognitive activity.

Literature-based discussion groups are characterized by children actively engaged in reading, thinking, and talking about their and their peers' interpretations of text. The approach of literature-based discussion groups engage students in aesthetic reading and provide students with the opportunity to transform words into meaning (Galda, 1996). According to Smith (2004), aesthetic reading is defined as "…in aesthetic reading the reader is focally concerned with what is felt during the reading event.… Aesthetic reading may include awareness of subsequent applications and may well be influenced by and have later effects upon social realities, but the focus of attention is nevertheless on the reader's experience of the text during the reading event" (p. 144). The approach incorporates the sociocognitive aspect of learning and has gained popularity in first language environment (Evans, 1996). Unlike the skills-based pedagogical approach where students take an efferent stance, in that they only "carry away" the concepts or information of the reading text, the "aesthetic reading" approach concentrates a student's attention on "what he is living through" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). Rosenblatt (1978) explains that students' attention during aesthetic reading is not on the information being acquired, but rather focused on the problem being solved or the actions being taken. Stated another way, students' primary attention is on "what happens during the actual reading event", and on "what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). Through transaction with the text and

interaction with knowledgeable others about their experience with the text, literature discussion groups provide a learning environment that is conducive to meaningful literacy learning at various grade levels (Alvermann, Weaver, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, Thrash, & Zalewski, 1996; Boyd & Galda, 1997; Brock, 1997; Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000; Tin, 2003; Whitmore, 1997; Worthy & Beck, 1995).

The purpose of the review is to identify the various types of discussion groups, review the empirical literature on the impact of discussion groups on student learning across age groups and populations, and identify the challenges that teachers typically face when implementing this teaching strategy in the classrooms and pose some areas for future research. In the past few years, the instructional approach of literature-based discussion groups has received lots of attention (Maloch, 2002). While literature-based discussion groups are frequently cited in educational conferences, books and journals (Brabham & Villaume, 2000), there are both subtle and distinct differences about the various types and forms. Literature-based discussion groups do not represent a single construct or instructional approach, but rather represent an umbrella consisting of a multitude of terms including Literature Discussion Groups, Literature Circles, Literature Study Groups, Book Sharing Sessions, Conversational Discussion Groups, and Book Clubs. Table 1 presents the similarities and differences in the various types of literature based discussion groups.

Table 1. Types of Literature-based Discussion Groups

	Literature Discussion Groups	**Literature Circles**	**Literature Study Groups**	**Book Sharing Sessions**	**Conversational Discussion Groups**	**Book Clubs**
Also known as..	literature circles or literature study		literature study circles or lit sets			
Grouping	heterogeneously grouped	can be small groups or whole class	heterogeneously grouped	heterogeneously grouped	heterogeneously grouped	heterogene-ously grouped / teacher assignment or self-selection
Group Size	5-8	4-5	3-4	3-4	4-6	3-6
Student selected books		*	*	*		*
Teacher selected	*				*	
Teacher facilitates	*	*	*	*	*	
Student discussions	*	*	*	*	*	*
Writing component	*	*	*		*	*

One distinction is how groups are formed; either by teacher assignment or self-selection. Another grouping distinction is heterogeneous or homogeneous groups by race, gender, and/or ability. Besides forming the heterogeneous groups in literature-based discussion groups, researchers have been interested in investigating the use of the discussion groups according to ability grouping. For example, Wollman-Bonilla (1994) investigated ability grouping in a sixth grade literature discussion classroom to see how the children conducted discussion and to see what type of discussion took place in the classroom. The teacher encouraged students to engage in informal discussion by having students share their reading. The group, which consisted of more able readers, read more sophisticated literature while the less able reader group read the literature which was two grade levels lower than their actual grade. Findings revealed that in the more able reader group, students eagerly participated in the discussion and valued the contribution from each group member. Students also tended to appreciate the opportunity to exchange their thoughts, and they helped each other develop more understanding about the text. They also revealed more positive affect during literature discussions than when reading by themselves. In contrast, students in the less able group, tended to show lower self-esteem and they viewed each other as poor readers. Under such circumstances, they did not show much enthusiasm for the literature discussion. Their conversation tended to be short and without much critical thinking in the process. This study raises the possibility that ability grouping did not seem to work well in this classroom. The teacher thought that the less able students would not be able to discuss the text unless they understood the text and were able to comprehend the text. This study echoes both McMahon and Goatley's (1995), and Raphael and Goatley's (1994) studies that less able readers and special education students need "the knowledgeable others" to assist them to discuss the text, and help them develop their understanding of the text. It showed that heterogeneous grouping appears to be a more effective instructional setting for this type of intervention. In terms of text, some groups are characterized by students' self-selection. However, the teacher is most likely to select the text for Literature-based Discussion Groups and Conversational Discussion Groups. With the exception of the Book Clubs, teachers typically act as facilitator. The one common denominator is that students are engaged in oral discussion of reading material.

RESEARCH ON LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSION GROUPS

Literature-based discussion group is a generic term often used to encompass many types of literature discussion groups. During the literature study groups, the student and the teacher (leader) are actively engaged in the process. The process of using literature-based discussion groups and the empirical study of the impact on literacy has been conducted at various grade levels, reading ability levels, and with students of various cultural and ethnic groups.

Literature-Based Discussion Groups at Elementary Schools

Eeds and Wells (1989) investigated fifth and sixth graders formed into groups of four to eight heterogeneous members. One college student served as a group leader in each of the discussion groups. Children were free to choose their group members in this study. The results indicated that children and teachers (i.e., the college students) constructed meaning by interacting with each other. Children were able to construct simple meaning from the text, and were also able to relate their personal experience to the stories that they read. Students made predictions and became active readers in the discussion process and they were also trained to be critical readers and evaluators. The study showed that the students were capable of doing aesthetic reading and it showed the positive side of implementing literature discussion groups in elementary classrooms. In addition to looking at older children in the discussion groups, and how they interacted in teacher-led or student-led settings, researchers have also implemented the approach in classrooms with younger children. For example, McCormack (1997) examined how 27 second grade students used their turns at speaking and investigated what they said during the nine peer-led literature discussion groups that lasted for five weeks in the classroom. These young children discussed an African folk tale without the teacher's presence and they were given tape recorders to tape the discussion. The teacher circulated around the heterogeneous discussion groups and acted as a facilitator. Results showed that first, these second graders usually took turns to offer retellings or introduced a new topic but each new topic was seldom sustained by the rest of the students or was talked about by the one who initiated the topic. Apart from summarizing the story, sometimes these young students did not know what to say even though they were given the opportunities to speak. However, the author states that after practice,

these children were able to sustain a topic or theme and they also improved their discussion. The second finding showed that these children were able to use "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse". The language that children used in the discussion was greatly influenced by the language in the books they read. The study shows that given opportunities to talk about the literature, even the younger children can benefit from the discussion. Not only do they reach the maturity to compose their own language by learning from the text, but they can learn how to build community and construct the text meaning without the teacher's presence.

Literature-Based Discussion Groups and At-Risk High School Students

Apart from examining how literature-based discussion groups have been exercised in elementary schools, some researchers also investigated how at-risk high school students participated in literature discussion. For example, Boyd (1997) and Boyd and Galda (1997) looked at how four at-risk high school students who were placed in the alternative Cross-Aged Literacy Program participated in their own literacy learning. This program encompassed social and cognitive aspects as opposed to the traditional literacy instruction in the classroom setting. These low-achieving adolescents coming from culturally diverse backgrounds had the opportunity to gather together and practice reading, writing and literature-discussion under the guidance of the teacher. In this program, students were instructed to read, write, conduct discussion and examine what they read. Thus, they were given the chance to engage in meaningful learning, to be responsible for their own learning, stimulate each other to talk and share their own ideas. The results showed that this program allowed these adolescents who were not able to read or write well the opportunity to construct knowledge together. They regained their self-confidence through talking and interacting with each other.

In another study conducted by Alvermann et al. (1996), using literature-based discussion groups to investigate how at-risk students and culturally diverse high school students experienced the text-based discussions. They looked at five different cultural diverse settings across the United States to evaluate this discussion activity with the hope of improving teacher instruction. Results show that there were three assertions which were generated from the students in the study. First, students were aware of the conditions that they believe to be conducive to discussion. Second, students thought that both tasks and topics are two

key factors that influence their participation in class discussion. Third, these students thought that classroom discussion is helpful for them to understand what they read. This multi-case study looking at different sites across different classrooms, provided us the opportunity to be aware of middle and high school students' perspectives on the discussion groups.

Literature-Based Discussion Groups and the Teacher' Role

Another form of literature-based discussion groups, literature circles (Whitmore, 1997) or literature study (Roberts, Jensen, and Hadjiyianni, 1997) are typically facilitated by the teacher who guides, but does not dominate the discussion. Gilles, Dickinson, McBride, and Vandover (1994) examined how three classroom teachers experienced "roadblocks" in the discussion groups and how they turned the roadblocks into questions and inquiries. The results demonstrate that the teachers did not give up on the literature-based discussion groups approach when they encountered difficulties in each classroom. For instance, one of the teachers found that she was constricting students' thinking with her questions. The students had no chance to raise real questions about their own reading because she kept switching to a new topic. She came to realize that she needed to examine her own talk in order to pursue her inquiries. After she modified her instructional approach, she discovered that her students all talked more and enjoyed discussing the reading materials with the same group members.

Unlike literature-based discussion groups, book sharing literacy instruction uses multiple, student-selected texts. In Roller and Beed's (1994) study, they stated that book sharing sessions usually began with a student who gave the title and author of the book, and described the book briefly to his or her group. After the student had finished the presentation, he or she would invite other students or the teacher to ask questions or comment on the book. In their study of two settings with 8 to 12 years old students using the book sharing literacy instruction, Roller and Beed discovered that these students were "enthusiastically engaged in their search and are actively exploring text meaning collaboratively" (p. 509).

Comparison of Literature-Based Discussion Groups

Student engagement in conversational discussion groups is evidenced by the free expression that is encouraged by the teacher. The approach included an opening, discussion, and debriefing phases. For

example Almasi, O'Flahavan and Arya (2001) examined two groups of six to ten fourth graders discussing teacher assigned texts across four months. They looked at how proficient and less proficient peer discussion groups manage topics, manage group processes and how proficient and less proficient peer discussions develop across time. The results demonstrated that the more proficient group engaged in a substantive amount of shifts to old topics and they also sustain topics by embedding and making linkages far more than the less proficient group. This study helps us comprehend the complexities which are involved in making successful peer discussions of reading texts.

Another study also conducted by Almasi (1995) investigated a comparison of teacher-led and peer-led discussion groups. Almasi (1995) looked at 97 fourth graders' sociocognitive conflict in both peer-led and teacher-led groups while they discussed narrative text together. Data sources show that there were three types of sociocognitive conflicts found in the study: conflicts within self, conflicts with others, and conflicts with text. The study showed that in peer-led groups more textually implicit conflicts within self came from students' comments and questions during discussion. However, the conflicts were resolved by exchanging the comments and background knowledge with their peers. By contrast, in teacher-led groups, the conflict within self derived from teacher's questions and comments, which were textually explicit. Students resolved these conflicts by telling the factual information from the text. There was little evidence of conflicts with others in either situation. In the case of conflict with text, Almasi found that it was infrequent in the peer-led situation because students tended to help each other to resolve the conflict. Conversely, in teacher-led groups, conflict with text was frequent. Other important findings show that students in peer-led discussion groups tended to have ownership of the discussion in that they were "substantively engaged" rather than "procedurally engaged" in the discussion. Furthermore, the discourse in peer-led groups was extended and more complex than the ones in teacher-led groups. Finally, students in peer-led groups recognized and resolved episodes of sociocognitive conflict better than those in teacher-led groups. This study also showed that in teacher-led groups the discourse involved mostly initiate-response-evaluate conversations while in peer-led discussion groups there were more complex conversations initiated and sustained by the students. These findings show the value of implementing this approach in the classroom.

Research on the book club, a small student-led discussion group with three to six members in heterogeneous groups, has been conducted at the elementary and adult levels (Raphael, McMahon, Goatley, Bentley, Boyd, Pardo, & Woodman, 1992).

There are four components in book clubs: (a) reading, (b) writing, (c) discussion, and (d) instruction. For example, in Frank, Dixon and Brandt's (1998) study, they examined how second graders and their teachers constructed academic and social content through the Book Club. The result shows that the Book Club helped these younger students discuss reading materials in ways which helped enable them to construct knowledge about the stories they read and engaged them in the cognitive processes. Another study which was conducted by McMahon and Goatley (1995), looked at how fifth graders with prior experience with Book Clubs served as "knowledgeable others" and helped lead their peers who did not have the same experience in the small group discussion. The teacher deliberately grouped the students according to their cultural diversity, different reading and writing abilities and experiences with Book Clubs. The result shows that given the opportunity to work together, they were able to adopt leadership roles, and they also helped each other to talk. It also shows the effectiveness of using heterogeneous groups in literature-based discussion groups. Another study conducted by Addington (2001) compares the graduate students' talk about literature in university book club and seminar settings. The result shows that in the former setting, the adults' talk tends to be more personal and more collaborative. In addition, there was less teacher-directed and text-driven situations than those in the latter setting. This research demonstrates a more proficient pedagogical practice in teaching literature.

In summary, the studies above indicated that literature-based discussion groups help improve students' reading comprehension, make students construct simple meaning, compose their own language and build community without the teacher's presence. Literature-based discussion groups also allow students to gain self-confidence in that students tend to talk more and express themselves more fully. Finally, literature-based discussion groups empower learners in their explorations of reading texts and in becoming independent learners.

Research Limitation

The reviewing of the articles above demonstrates that the

implementation of literature-based discussion groups in the classroom seems to be a beneficial activity. However, in identifying some of the weaknesses in the studies reviewed above, there are several issues that need to be pointed out. First, based on the data resources, instead of collecting data over an extended period, some researchers collected the data within a short period of time. The short length of time usually may not be sufficient to develop, refine, and support the outcome. Consequently, the researchers may not be able to get an accurate picture of the phenomenon examined. For example, in Eeds and Wells' study, the fifth and sixth graders chose their favorite novels and met with the group leaders to talk about their reading only twice per week for half an hour each day over a four to five week period. In McMahon and Goatley's (1995) study, they investigated how fifth graders with prior experience in Book Clubs acted as "knowledgeable others" for their peers with no experience in a Book Club. The study included the analysis of the children's discussions on three days over four weeks, with only one at the beginning of the book, one in the middle and another during the final chapter of the book. Although the authors claimed there were interactional pattern changes in the students' discussions, the evidence provided by this study was not convincing enough. In terms of depth, Patton (2002) pointed out that "Qualitative methods permit inquiry into selected issues in great depth with careful attention to detail, context, and nuance…" (p. 227). However, in the study conducted by Alvermann et al. although they placed students' experiences with the literature discussion groups at the center of their research, the breadth of the study which covered five culturally diverse sites across the United States limited our insight into the individual school setting.

The second issue has to do with the size of the group. Cohen (1994) states "Groups larger than five present problems for participation in interaction. For group discussions I have always found that four or five is an optimal size. As the group gets larger there is more of a chance that one person will be left out of the interaction almost entirely" (p. 60). In light of this, it is really hard to tell whether each student in the studies reviewed would get equal opportunity to express his or her thought, especially when the student might bring his or her self-selected books to the group. For example, in Eeds and Wells' study, there were five to seven students in each group. In the study conducted by Gilles et al. the classroom teacher worked with each group of five to eight students. In Almasi et al.'s (2001) study, the number of each peer discussion group

varied from nine to ten. They claimed that the reason for the big group size was that "placing fewer students in a group would have meant that other groups in the class had 11 or 12 students" (p. 103). They also asserted that "For ethical reasons we opted to sustain larger and unequal numbers in our peer discussion groups to maintain equity within each classroom" (p. 103). In another study conducted by Almasi (1995), we saw the nature of 97 fourth graders' sociocognitive conflicts in six peer-led and teacher-led discussion groups but we were never informed how big the group size was. In Roller and Beed's study, one of the groups even had 15 students. With such a big group size mentioned above, the problems of nonparticipation and interpersonal difficulties might have taken place in the group discussion and thus influenced the outcome of the studies.

The final issue is "how do we really know students learned more from this method than other literacy experiences". According to Evans (2002), her notions of what constitutes an effective literature discussion are literacy development and group process. However, in the studies reviewed above, there was little evidence in children's literacy development. For example, in Roller and Beed's study, the classroom teacher discovered that although the students were talking enthusiastically about the literature, the talk seemed "content free" and "lifeless". The teacher even pointed out that such exchanges were quite common. In McMahon and Goately's study, the researchers also found that the students in the discussion group seemed to experience the three different phases: (a) the number and extent of pauses between speakers, (b) the types of questions peers asked and the short answers students provided, and (c) the apparent lack of up-take on ideas introduced. In Eeds and Wells' study, in analyzing the data, they intentionally took out the "less successful" data which showed that "the students seemed to spend most of their time retelling the story or talking about the part they liked best, not going beyond dealing with simple meaning" (p. 7). The above findings showed little evidence of the children's growth in literacy.

TEACHERS' CONSIDERATIONS WHILE IMPLEMENTING LITERATURE-BASED DISCUSSION GROUPS

Although researchers who conducted literature-based discussion groups have reported positive findings, there are other limitations and

issues that accompany the implementation of literature-based discussion groups. These issues have to do with the role of the teacher, students' roles, non-school talk, power relationships and gender differences.

Role of the Teacher

The studies examined above looked at grade levels varying from second to sixth grade, high schools, universities, and graduate schools. They have demonstrated the benefits of utilizing literature-based discussion groups in the classrooms. However, issues regarding the role of the teacher, such as how to scaffold, model, and monitor the teaching, how to help students get accustomed to the group discussion, and how to help students initiate the topic and maintain the discussion, all point out the importance of teachers' roles in the discussion groups.

For example, in Eeds and Wells' (1989) study, they used the college students who were in the reading practicum course and who did not always play the role of knowledgeable others in the discussion groups. The authors chose these students who did not have any experience working with children before as group leaders because they did not want these college students to affect the group discussion. The leaders in the group discussions did not model the discussion. However, the authors did encourage the group leaders to "seize a teachable moment if they recognized one" (p. 7). This caused frustration and confusion to one of the group leaders. The leader found it hard to control students' talk in the group. The study points out the importance of the role of the teacher in the discussion groups.

In Brock's study, she investigated how the approach of the discussion groups could provide academic assistance to the 27 third-grade ESL learners. She guided and scaffolded the lesson through initial writing, focusing on community share, read-aloud and partner-reading opportunities, and texts and prompts that she chose to emphasize. After they went through all these activities, students then started to participate in the literature discussion groups. The study also illustrates the importance of the teacher's role in the ESL classroom. By scaffolding the class, the ESL students showed the potential to employ higher level thinking and reasoning process, and they also had important and valuable ideas to contribute to the classroom discussion.

In McCormack's (1997) study, the teacher also circulated around the heterogeneous discussion groups and acted as a facilitator so that after practice the second graders could take turns to offer retellings or

introduce a new topic. They were able to sustain a topic or theme and they also improved their discussion.

The studies presented above demonstrate the importance of teachers' roles in the discussion groups. Teachers need to provide scaffolding modeling, and to monitor the teaching. In addition, they should help students get used to the group discussion and help students initiate and maintain the discussion.

Role of Students

Implementing literature-based discussion groups in classrooms has been proved to be effective in helping students learn literacy. It is also valued for giving students an active stance. Evans (1996) challenged this approach because she felt that students' voices and opinions were not actually being heard in student-led discussion groups. She claims that "literature discussion groups were extremely complex academic, social, and cultural contexts" (p. 194). She thinks that "the assumption that peer-led discussion groups represent democratic contexts for students to voice their opinions and exercise control over their learning becomes problematic" (p. 194). In her investigation of five students in a fifth-grade class engaging in student-led literature-based discussion groups, she discovered that students in their group assumed specific roles in the discussion. One student was positioned as "powerless." Another student was not successful in making her opinions valued because she could not retain her position in the group. Some boys tended to "marginalize" other group members and placed other students in a "powerless" status.

Cohen and Lotan (1995) claimed that,

> cooperative learning is widely recommended as a method of creating equity in heterogeneous classrooms. However, small groups will also develop status orders based on perceived differences in academic status: high-status students will interact more frequently than low-status students. Moreover, these differences in interaction can lead to differences in learning outcomes—that is, those who talk more, learn more. (p. 100)

Cohen (1994) thinks that each member in the group can be given a specific role to play, which will "reduce problems of one or more members' making no contribution to the group or one member's

dominating the group" (p. 75). She further states that if the group members in the group are responsible for certain roles, they will "feel very satisfied with their part in the group process" (p. 75).

Keegan and Shrake (1991) suggested using specific tasks to help students discuss the reading materials in the group discussions because students will assume more responsibility while participating in the group discussion. The specific tasks include the reader, who begins the discussion by reading the teacher's response and the question to be discussed to the group members; the coordinator, who makes sure that each member in the group has the opportunity to join in the discussion; the mechanic who is responsible for recording the group conversation; the notetaker/secretary keeps track of students' roles and the content that the group decides to read for the following class.

Daniels (1994) also suggests using role sheets in group discussions so that each member in the group will have a certain task to perform. He states that the purpose of the role sheets is to help students read and discuss better. However, assigning roles to students should be "transitional" and "temporary" devices. Furthermore, he claims that the description of the role sheets is to motivate "collaborative learning" among the students. By assigning students to different roles, students will have "clearly defined," "interlocking" tasks to perform. He also suggests that rotating the roles will give students opportunities to work through different purposes for reading.

Evans (1996) questioned the findings of the benefits of student-led literature-based discussion groups and the effect of students' being assigned roles by the teachers in each group. Short (1995) was also opposed to dividing tasks and roles among the group members and she argued that it "…shut down the thinking and talk which is at the heart of dialogue" (p. 2). However, by using the role sheets, students will have a foundation for talking based on each role in the group so that high status students will not dominate the talk while low status ones will be ignored by the group. Each student has a certain task and equal opportunity to perform and achieve the learning goals.

Non-School Talk

As several researchers have pointed out that in their research reports, sometimes "non-school talk," 'side conversations," "derogatory" comments or gestures were heard or seen in the discussion groups. For example, in Worthy and Beck's (1995) study there were times when

students had "side conversations," which means that they were talking to one another while the discussion was still in session. Furthermore, some students made "derogatory" comments or gestures when they heard the questions raised and comments made from their peers. In Whitmore's (1997) study, she also discovered that the ESL learners had non-school talk in the discussion. Roller and Beed (1994) also found that their 8- to 12-year-old less-able children in the book sharing sessions did not make "grand conversation" similarly to previously reported research. They found that although children engaged in literature discussions enthusiastically, they were still making "content-free" and "lifeless" remarks.

These studies point out that there was evidence of non-academic talk during the discussion groups. However, if more attention is paid to listen to students' discussions, the teacher will find that students can achieve their learning goals once the teacher helps the students learn how to participate in the discussions.

Social Drama

The social conflicts and power relationships happening in the classroom during group discussion have been examined to consider the effects they may have on the quality of discussions and of learning literacy. Lewis (1997) conducted a study on the social drama of literature discussions. She investigated the influence of student power and status on fifth and sixth grades peer-led literature-based discussion groups. She was also interested in the shaping influence of power and status on the nature of peer-led discussion groups. She examined five multi-aged and mixed gender fifth and sixth graders in literature discussions. Findings show that each of the group members seemed to hold different attitudes and expectations toward interpretive competence and social competence. These two factors created conflicts while the discussion was in progress. Findings also revealed that ability, age, gender, and class also created power within the classroom. For example, the sixth grade female students tended to dominate the conversation and the fifth graders' initiations tended to be ignored. In addition, sometimes the low-achiever in the group was "reprimanded" by the high-achievers when he did not meet his peers' expectation. This study showed that the teacher's role is extremely important when she assigned the roles in the group. For example, the teacher in this study had female students be the group leaders because she had affection toward the girls (Lewis, 1995). The

one who had the power owned the privilege to dominate the discussion and interrupt or ignore those who were less empowered.

These phenomena are considered to be "social drama" in the classrooms. In Lewis' view, the classroom context is never static; it is shaped and involves social relations among the group members. This factor sometimes affects the group discussion in the ways that some powerful voices will be heard while less powerful ones will be ignored, and therefore makes the discourse unsuccessful. These studies have informed us that when educators are implementing literature-based discussion groups in the classrooms, they should be aware of the power relationships within groups.

CONCLUSION

In traditional teacher-centered classrooms, teachers dominate most of the talk in the classrooms while students' voices are seldom heard. Literature-based discussion groups not only encourage students to talk in class, but allow students to draw on their personal experience and relate it to the stories. Researchers have found that this teaching strategy which uses group discussion of reading materials can help students improve reading comprehension (Alvermann et al., 1987; Goldenberg, 1993), gain deeper understanding about the texts (Alvermann et al., 1996), engage and pay more attention to their reading (Alvermann et al., 1996; Goatley et al., 1995; Goldenberg, 1993), express themselves more fully (Almasi, 1995; Whitmore, 1997) and find their favorite topics to talk about (Almasi, 1995; Brock, 1997; McCormack, 1997), ask more questions, increase the level of participation (Close, 1992), create a sense of community (Alvermann et al., 1996; Whitmore, 1997), clarify confusions and engage in more complex , higher-level thinking (Goatley et al., 1995), solve problems (Goatley et al., 1995; Roller & Beed, 1994), give students opportunities to articulate their own thoughts and voice themselves (Whitmore, 1997) in a non-threatening environment (Almasi, 1995; Brock, 1997), and more importantly, empower learners in their explorations of reading texts and in becoming independent learners (Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1995).

The studies reviewed demonstrate the advantages and issues of implementing literature-based discussion groups in different classrooms. The review also studied the design of the group discussions and examined the discussion groups across different populations. However,

peer discussion seldom occurs in the classroom. In addition, lots of research papers still document "the historic and widespread prevalence of recitation in American schools" (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001, p. 249).

Today, the same situation is happening in English as a Foreign Language settings where teachers tend to dominate most of the talk in class. Students' voices are seldom heard. Given the fact that literature-based discussion groups have been successfully implemented in the literacy classrooms in the US, and the benefits of the discussion groups have been addressed extensively from different perspectives, it is worthwhile for English as a Foreign Language teachers to consider the implementation of this teaching strategy in their classrooms. Finally, although studies in literature-based discussion groups had been conducted in EFL settings, such as Lin's (2006) study investigating the effect of literature circles on EFL instruction in primary school in Taiwan as well as Chou's (2007) study exploring student talk among secondary students in a Taiwanese English reading class, the area of using literature-based discussion groups in EFL settings and the issues such as the role of the teacher, the role of the students, non-school talk, and social drama were not examined in detail in literature-based discussion groups in EFL classrooms. Research in these fields needs to be further explored.

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