



CHAPTER 12

Let's Read, Write, and Talk About It: Literature Circles for English Learners

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I like literature circles because you can really talk about the book with other kids. Share your thoughts and hear other kids' ideas about the book and what you wrote in your journal. Your connections, questions, what you think about, and what you feel. You can talk openly and no one will say anything against you or your writings. (Pavel, age 11)

Many students express the idea that literature circles are exciting and that they enjoy talking about books. As shown by Pavel's response, literature circles involve many facets of learning, such as asking questions and connecting books to their own lives. This chapter explores how literature circles work for students and in particular for English learners. The teaching practices can be applied to English learners as well as fluent English speakers. Literature circles are for all students.

Both authors of this chapter, former elementary teachers, wanted to discover the best ways to implement literature circles with English learners. We asked local public school teachers in Pasco and Battleground, Washington, USA, if we could work with students to introduce literature circles. Deanna Gilmore spent seven months, one day a week, working with English learners from Russia and the Ukraine. There were six boys and nine girls, ages 8–11, in grades 3–5. Some students had just immigrated to the United States, and others had been in the United States for up to three years. They had varying levels of English speaking and writing abilities. Gilmore read aloud books to the students and implemented various literacy strategies. She read quality books such as *Molly's Pilgrim* (Cohen, 1983), *When Jessie Came Across the Sea* (Hest, 1997), and two of Patricia Polacco's books, *Babushka's Doll* (1995) and *Rechenka's Eggs* (1996). Gilmore chose these books because they had a connection with students' Russian culture.

Deanna Day worked with an English teacher two to three days a week for three months, collaboratively implementing literature circles with sixth graders. The class was

a mix of English learners and fluent English speakers. The English learners were from Russia, Ukraine, and Mexico, and were at diverse proficiency levels in their learning of English. For one month, Day and the students read aloud and discussed picture books. The next round of literature circles consisted of one book and small groups, and the last round involved small-group literature circles around a theme.

In this chapter, we share different ideas and strategies to use in literature circles with English learners. We begin by defining literature circles and explaining the importance of scaffolding English learners. Next we discuss how to use literature circles with English learners and we present several strategies that work well with English learners. We address the monitoring of students in literature circles, making connections to real life, asking questions, and, finally, celebrating literature circles. In order to help teachers understand how English learners react to literature circles, the chapter includes quotations by students. (All students' names are pseudonyms.)

What Are Literature Circles?

Literature circles, also known as literature discussions, book clubs, or literature studies, are formed when a group of readers gathers together to talk about a book in depth (Strube, 1996). Literature circles are grounded in a sociopsycholinguistic view of the reading process, one that recognizes the way in which reading is a meaning-making process (Samway & Whang, 1996).

In literature circles, students usually read a selection of literature on their own and then discuss it in a small group of four to six students. These discussions are guided by students' responses to what they have read, rather than by a list of teacher questions (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). Peterson and Eeds (1990) state that intensive reading occurs when group members share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, personal connections, ideas, and problems about the books. The talk in these discussions shifts to dialogue when students' perceptions are altered and their meaning is worked out and expanded with other readers.

Scaffolding English Learners

Teachers understand that they have to make many accommodations when they have English learners in their classrooms. Herrell and Jordan (2004) note that teachers should “scaffold” or help the learner understand English by using props, gestures, pictures—anything that can help them understand what is going on in the text. Teachers serve as scaffolds when they demonstrate a procedure, guide students through a task, break complex tasks into smaller steps, and supply information. According to Vygotsky (1978a, 1978b), as students gain knowledge and experience about how to perform the task, teachers gradually withdraw their support so that students make the transition from social interaction to internalized, independent function. This holds true in literature circle discussions.

Vygotsky also maintains that meanings arise in the mind of a student through interactions with other language users, and that students who use language as a tool for social interactions show increased cognitive growth. A student from Moldova unknowingly agreed with this research when he said,

I really like to work with my partner because he helps me pronounce the words I don't know in English. (Sergei, age 10)

Using Literature Circles With English Learners

The benefits of using literature circles with English learners are many. When teachers facilitate literature circles, they help students develop community and increase students' understanding of different cultures (Owens, 1995). English learners hear natural oral language when native speakers talk about books. Literature circles help English learners gather stronger understandings of what they have read through written and artistic responses to the text. According to Brown (1994), English learners understand English better when they talk about books that mean something to them. He states, "Appropriate and meaningful communication in the second language is the best possible practice to engage in" (p. 69). Finally, literature circles are important for English learners because the students engage in natural talk about books.

The following comments from sixth-grade English learners support the idea that literature circles are important for acquiring oral language:

What I liked about the literature circles is sharing the book with other people because I never shared in class my thoughts or ideas because I was always embarrassed about things and they helped me to talk in front of class. (Irina, age 11)

In the literature circles I thought I would barely talk or just nod my head but no, I talked and talked. (Deli, age 10)

Note, however, that small-group discussions do not always just "happen" (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Lewis, 1997; Maloch, 2004). Teachers need to prepare students prior to the implementation of a literature discussion group (Maloch, 2004; Wiencek & O'Flahavan, 1994). Teachers can start by reading aloud quality picture books to students (in kindergarten through eighth grade). After reading several picture books and discussing them, teachers move on to reading aloud quality chapter books.

Choosing Quality Books

Samway and Whang (1996) suggest that teachers choose books featuring rich language, interesting plots, and richly developed characters. They also recommend that teachers select books with lots of photos and illustrations for English learners, as these help students understand the plot. Samway and Whang state, "Selecting books is critical because

it can change how students view books and themselves as readers” (p. 28). They also note that teachers should select books that are “based on the interests of their students” and that “lead them toward discussion” (p. 15).

When teachers read aloud books from other cultures, it helps English learners feel comfortable in the classroom. It also aids in teaching fluent English speakers about their classmates’ countries of origin.

Resources for finding quality books include the professional books *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K–8 Classroom* (Harris, 1997) and *Multicultural Voices in Contemporary Literature: A Resource for Teachers* (Day, 1999). Professional journals are also helpful in finding quality literature. Two such journals are *Book Links* (American Library Association) and *Horn Book Magazine* (The Horn Book), as are the monthly columns in *The Reading Teacher* (International Reading Association), *Language Arts* (National Council of Teachers of English), and *Journal of Children’s Literature* (Children’s Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English).

Implementing Read-Alouds

One of the best ways for students to learn how to read is to hear others read books (Galda & Cullinan, 2000; Trelease, 1985). When students hear stories read aloud, their emotional development improves and their imagination is enhanced. Rasinski (1989) maintains that when students hear a quality book read to them, they develop a sense of story, their vocabularies improve, and they are motivated to finish reading the book on their own.

Rosenblatt (1938) advocates choosing books that hold some link with the readers’ past and present preoccupations, anxieties, and ambitions. Some picture books that are particularly good for read-alouds followed by discussion are *Sister Anne’s Hands* (Lorbiecki, 1998), *Wilma Unlimited* (Krull, 1996), *White Socks Only* (Coleman, 1996), *Richard Wright and the Library Card* (Miller, 1997), *I Hate English* (Levine, 1995), *La Mariposa* (Jimenez, 1998), and *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997).

After reading aloud a book, the teacher begins a whole-group discussion by asking students, “What do you think about the book?” and “How do you feel about the book?” Students voluntarily and informally share their feelings and thoughts. The teacher demonstrates by sharing his or her own thoughts and ideas. The teacher also tells the students that talking about a book is just like discussing a movie or a television program with friends. It is important to stress natural discussion or talk that occurs between family and friends—talk, laugh, give advice, disagree, sympathize, and share your inner thoughts (Smith, 1990).

Discussing Literature in Small Groups

There are many advantages to having English learners work in small groups rather than in a whole-class setting. Kucer, Silva, and Delgado-Larocco (1995) ascertain that English learners tend to respond more often in small-group settings than in whole-class situations.

Moreover, students pay more attention to the way their English-speaking peers use English when they are in comfortable settings, such as in a literature circle (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2004). English learners agree:

I like literature circles because when a class is talking about a book [whole group] there are too much people and you may not be called on. (Juan, age 11)

In literature circles three to five people can take turns to share their ideas and everyone will get a turn. (Katrina, age 11)

One student shared this interesting insight:

Not everyone is agreeable all the time in literature circles. It is sometimes hard to work in the groups with some people. (Valentin, age 11)

Once students understand how to share in verbal discussions with others, the teacher can organize books around themes, concepts, topics, or just based on a certain author or illustrator. One example of a theme is poverty. Books with this theme include *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* (Barnwell, 1998), *May'naise Sandwiches & Sunshine Tea* (Belton, 1994), *City Green* (DiSalvo-Ryan, 1994), and *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998).

The teacher introduces the theme and the books through book talks and invites students to browse through the texts. The teacher encourages students to read the back cover and to read one page in the middle of the book to determine if it is a good match for them. Next, students write their top three book choices on a secret ballot. The teacher forms the literature circle groups with four or five students, trying to honor students' first or second choices. The next day the teacher gives students their new books.

When they meet for the first time, the literature circle groups decide how many times they will read the book (if it is a picture book) before they will discuss it fully. If the book is a chapter book, students use a calendar to determine how many pages they will read each day to complete the book by the due date. The teacher supports English learners by giving them a large amount of time to read books in school. Students can read the books during reader's workshop or sustained silent reading.

Transitioning to Chapter Books

Once students are comfortable talking about picture books, the teacher transitions them to reading and discussing a whole-class chapter book or even various chapter books. During the literature circles, the sixth graders all read the same book: *The Music of Dolphins* (Hesse, 1998). This book was chosen specifically because of the brief chapters, large font size, and the gradual transition to smaller font. This helped the English learners feel more comfortable (most of them were reading below grade level). Choosing this text was important for the older students because it had the appearance

of simplicity yet contained several engaging issues. The English learners in the class connected to the main character, Mila, because she moved away from her friends and also had to learn a new language.

Pairing Students for Partner Reading

To specifically help English learners, the teacher pairs every student in the class with a partner for the length of the whole-class chapter book. There are different ways to do this: The teacher may pair an English learner with a proficient English speaker or pair two English learners together. The key is to find two students who can work together, support each other, and complete the book. Teachers can use partner reading for the first chapter book and for the remaining books give students choice in how they read the books. If students are having difficulty reading the book on their own or with a partner, adult volunteers can read aloud the book to English learners. Another support for students is to have them listen to audiotapes of the stories they are reading in class.

Students like to work with partners:

When we read the book I liked the way we read with partners because if we read by ourselves we could read too fast and not catch some things that were important. (Maria, age 8)

I liked partner reading a lot because at the end of every chapter we got to go over what we had just read. (Bogdhan, age 10)

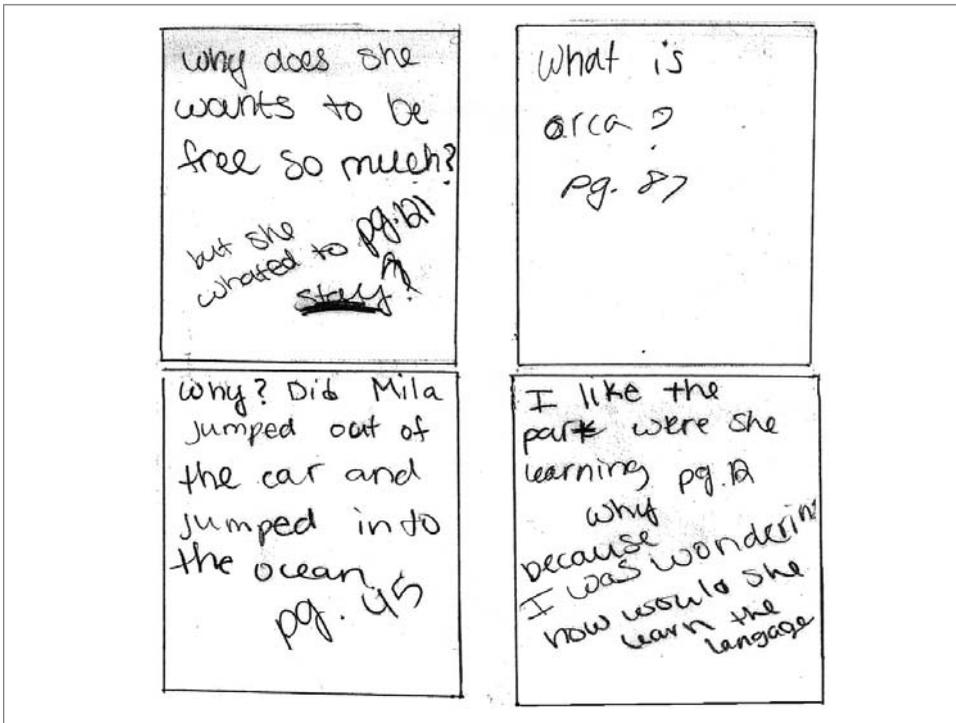
Strategies That Work Well With English Learners

Certain strategies help engage English speakers and English learners, including sticky notes, sketch to stretch, story hats, graffiti board, bookmarks, open mind portraits, and writing in journals. These strategies help students think about texts and prepare them for discussions about the book. The teacher introduces each strategy through a minilesson and demonstrates how to complete the strategies during a read-aloud—before asking students to use the strategies on their own.

Sticky Notes

One strategy that is beneficial for English learners is the use of sticky notes (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). As students read their books, the teacher has them mark the text they want to discuss with others in the literature circle. Students write on their sticky notes why they chose certain parts. The teacher has students mark pages that they learned from, loved, cared about, couldn't stop reading, connected to, questioned, puzzled over, thought were funny, or found surprising (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). During a read-aloud the teacher demonstrates thinking and writing on sticky notes at the same time. The teacher posts the pages of the book to show English learners how to use the strategy. (Figure 12.1 shows several sample sticky notes in response to *The Music of Dolphins*.)

FIGURE 12.1
Student Sticky Notes



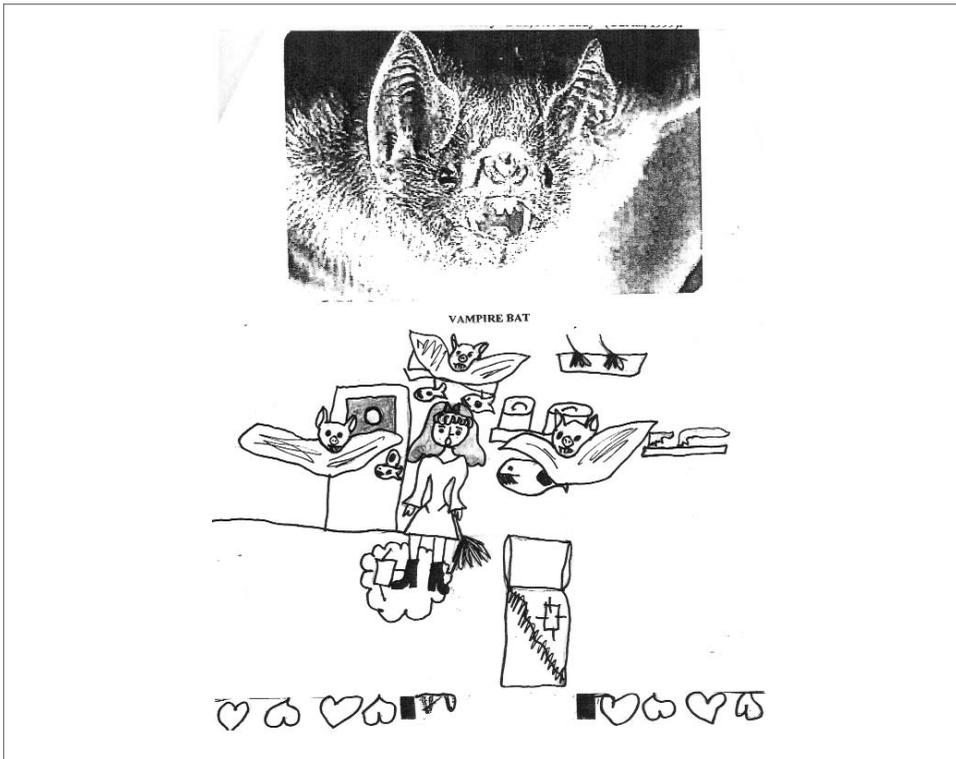
Sketch to Stretch

Sketch to stretch (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) is another strategy that is beneficial for English learners. After reading a book or during a read-aloud, the teacher invites students to make a sketch of what the story means to them—their feelings and thoughts about the story, *not* an illustration of the story. In literature circles, students share their sketches and their peers make comments.

Some English learners are more comfortable sharing their pictures with others in a knee-to-knee or eye-to-eye approach (Cole, 2003) because it helps them communicate through their drawings. After reading a chapter of *Bud, Not Buddy* (Curtis, 1999), for example, the teacher modified the sketch to stretch exercise by pasting colored cars on a paper and asking students to draw the man and Buddy in the car. Students also were directed to write dialogue for the story bubbles.

After completing the pictures, students come to the front of the room and share their pictures and dialogue. Figure 12.2 shows 10-year-old Ruslan's sketch based on *Bud, Not*

FIGURE 12.2
Student Sketch-to-Stretch Drawing



Buddy. He explained, “This is a picture of Bud in the car with a stranger. Bud thinks that he is a vampire, but I think he is just a man who works at a hospital and he is carrying blood to the patients.”

Story Hats

Another technique is to have students make a story hat (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). Students draw scenes from the story on an 11×14 sheet of construction paper while the teacher reads the book aloud. Students also write sentences to represent their thoughts about what is happening in the story. After they finish the drawings, students turn to their peers and share the pictures in a small literature circle. Students then fold the paper in the shape of a hat, staple it, and wear their story hats home. Elizabeth commented,

I like to hear [the teacher] read the story to us. That way I can draw what I am thinking about the story at the same time.

Graffiti Board

One strategy that generates a lot of enthusiasm from students is “graffiti board” (Short et al., 1996). A large piece of chart paper is placed in the middle of the table; each member of the group takes a corner and writes and draws his or her thoughts about the book in graffiti fashion. Students can use pictures or words to express their thoughts, which are not organized in any particular fashion. The major focus is brainstorming, after which students share their graffiti with one another in small literature circles.

Bookmarks

Students also can prepare bookmarks as they are reading a text to share in literature circles (Samway & Whang, 1996). While the teacher is reading the book, students record the interesting or puzzling words they encounter and write questions for their groups on the bookmarks. During the research project, it was around Valentine’s Day, so the bookmark was adapted to be a valentine for Deza, a character that Bud meets in the book *Bud, Not Buddy*. Students then shared their valentines with one another in small literature circles.

Open Mind Portraits

In this strategy, students have a precut face of a character in the book. In the inside there are two blank sheets of paper that are the same shape as the front page. All three pages have been stapled together. Students first draw the face and the hair of the character in the book. They are then instructed to open the book and write what is going on inside the mind of the particular character in the story (Tompkins, 2002). At times, teachers can include an outline of a particular building or setting where the story takes place. For instance, during the research project, this strategy was adapted for the book *Bud, Not Buddy*. Students were given a drawing of the outside of the shack that Bud was thrown into by his mean foster parents. They drew pictures of what was going on inside Bud’s mind within the outline of the shack and also drew what was really happening. Because students might not understand the concepts of hornets or vampire bats, pictures of hornets and vampire bats were pasted on the shack. Students were allowed to choose between the hornets or vampire bats to respond to in their drawings. After students drew the pictures, they talked about what they had drawn in their literature circles.

Journals

Another strategy that is successful with English learners is the use of journals. Commercial notebooks or journals can be used, but students seem to take the writing more seriously if teachers make a special journal for the specific book they are reading. To make a journal, teachers can fold in half 5 to 10 pieces of paper (depending on how many chapters or the length of the book; include at least one page for every two to

three chapters) and staple them together to form a 5-1/2x8-1/2 journal. The half pages are less intimidating than an entire page for students.

Students write after they have read one to three chapters. To help English learners specifically, the teacher brainstorms open-ended prompts that students can use to begin their journal entries, such as “I predict,” “My favorite part,” “I connect,” and “I would change.” Before discussing books in literature circles, students highlight areas in their journals that they want to share with the group. The teacher responds to each journal entry every few days, encouraging students in their reading, thinking, and understanding of the texts. (See Figure 12.3 for a sample journal entry in response to *The Music of Dolphins*.)

FIGURE 12.3
Student Journal Entry

Chapters 1-4
I noticed that Mila ~~is~~ knows a lot of things except that she is a girl and what a nose looks like.
I think Mila ~~is~~ was a dolphin because she showed a picture of a dolphin instead of a girl. I feel that Mila is learning new things. What if Mila wasn't found would she have died or gotten hurt? Why did Mila show a picture of hair instead of a picture of a nose? When Mila was learning that reminds me when I was learning how to write in Russian and Ukraine

Monitoring Students in Literature Circles

Teachers need to monitor the progress of English learners while they are reading their chapter books. As students are reading, the teacher listens to them and sits down with a pair to read along with them. The teacher takes “kid watching” (Owocki & Goodman, 2002) notes on a clipboard, listing the things that he or she is noticing about students’ reading. When a student’s partner is absent, the teacher places the student with another pair, if possible, or invites the student to read silently or with an audiotape. Sometimes the teacher becomes the student’s partner for the reading period.

After all students have finished reading their books, the teacher sets aside time for the literature circles. Students usually complete the entire book before beginning literature circles. Some teachers prefer to read one chapter and discuss the book. English learners usually read slowly and need lots of reading support, whereas fluent English speakers sometimes read fast. Waiting until everyone has completed the book encourages students to read at their own pace, and the discussions are usually of higher quality. Eeds and Wells (1989) suggest that teachers take the role of literary guide and help students move toward “grand conversations.” Teachers may play multiple roles in literature circles, including facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, & Crawford, 1999). Short et al. (1999) discovered that the role of the facilitator is the most frequent and includes (a) asking students to extend and expand their ideas, (b) providing additional information to clarify details related to the story, (c) restating comments when others have missed something, (d) aiding with conversational maintenance, and (e) challenging a student’s comment.

Making Connections to Real Life Through Literature Circles

One way to facilitate discussion is to ask students to connect something in the book to their own lives. If students see themselves in the characters of books, they may grapple with some serious issues and find solutions to their own problems. Students are able to do this by being allowed to make connections through discussions in literature circles (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). One student writes about a connection she made to the main character of Mila from *The Music of Dolphins* in Figure 12.4.

Sixth grader Isabelle commented on what it is like to make connections during literature circles:

I liked that we could make connections with other people’s connections.

The following transcribed conversation also indicates specific connections to the text *The Music of Dolphins*:

FIGURE 12.4
Making Connections Sample

Chapters 10-14

A connection of my life to Mila's, is when I just came to America I couldn't understand people when they talked on English. I think Mila will speak and understand better after she will live in this hospital about a year.

Ruslan: I have a connection on page 66. When she first got her recorder, and when I got my first recorder. I made a sound like that, too.

Katrina: Same here. When I got my recorder in fourth grade, I didn't know how to play it because I'd never really seen it before, and I made a really loud squeak when I got it. It was really bad!

Students went on to discuss connections they had with fish, fishing, and eating fish. Through this conversation, students more fully understand the text:

Steffan: I just can't think about eating raw fish.

Teacher: Yeah, but her perception is interesting, you know, that that's not good fish because it is dead.

- Michael: How would she know it was dead?
- John: Because it's not flailing around or whatever.
- Michael: Why did she only eat raw fish?
- Steffan: Um, because that's the only thing she ate when she was growing up with the dolphins.
- Teacher: It is kind of funny. But here is Sandy trying to give her a present, thinking, "Oh, she likes fish!" And then she says, "Yeah, if it's dead."

Asking Questions in Literature Circles

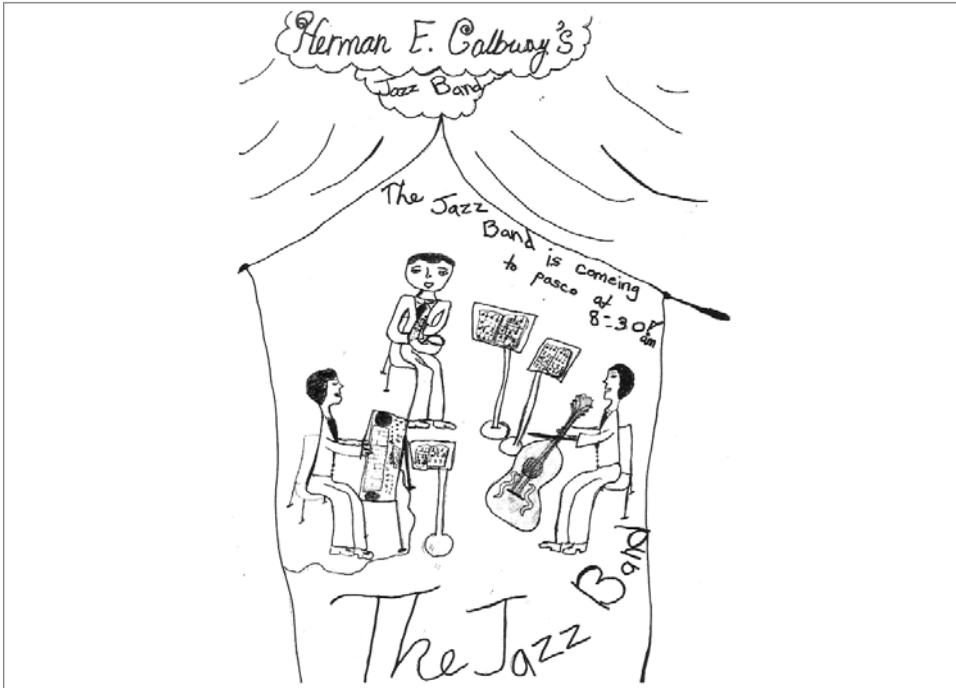
The teacher encourages students to ask questions about the text in the literature circles so that he or she can clear up any misunderstandings. During one literature circle about the book *Bud, Not Buddy*, a student asked, "What is a flyer?" Because this word was new to students, the teacher explained that in this case a flyer is a poster that is put up in the town to advertise Herman E. Calloway's band. The students interpreted the information from the story and drew their own posters (see Figure 12.5). Students volunteered to share their posters with others in the small-group literature circles.

When students are allowed to ask questions, they have the opportunity to think and gain greater understanding (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995). The teacher can also ask follow-up questions (e.g., "Why do you say that?") when participants use one-word or nondescript answers (Maloch, 2004). In one conversation, students ask questions about the book *The Music of Dolphins*:

- Steffan: When Sandy brought Mila a fish, a dead fish, and she said it's not edible. I know that she didn't like the dead fish, but I don't understand, like in the sea, the dolphins would bring her fish and how could she eat the live fish that had to die?
- Irina: Yeah, that's just weird.
- Ruslan: It would be in the dolphin's mouth.
- Steffan: Well, it's still dead.
- Irina: I know, and how could you eat the eyeballs? The guts? The eggs? I think I would rather eat seaweed.
- Ruslan: It's just like eating sushi.
- Pavel: But all the sushi we eat in America is smoked.
- Irina: Well, actually I had it from an Asian family and they did it by scratch and it was raw.

Students remarked about asking questions during literature circles:

FIGURE 12.5
Student Poster



What I enjoy about talking about the books in literature circles is that you catch some things that you didn't notice before. I get to ask questions about the book and my lit circle members will help me figure it out or give me ideas. (Katerina, age 10)

Some people had really good questions that took a while to answer. Most people in our literature circle got a lot of different and good ideas. (Ruslan, age 11)

Celebrating Literature Circles

To bring closure to a set of literature circles, teachers have a couple of possibilities. Sometimes the teacher brings all students together and lets the individual groups do a quick sharing or book talk. Other times the teacher has students plan and organize a presentation in which they connect their thoughts to share with others. Focus questions that are helpful are, "What do you want other students to learn about your book and discussion?" and "What do you think was most important about this book?" Through brainstorming, students decide the best way to share this information.

Students can make presentations through various sign systems, such as drama and visual arts (puppet shows, murals, ABC books, etc.). The teacher shares the many possibilities with students and allows the groups to decide which presentation would be best for their books. The teacher invites parents and another class to watch the literature presentations.

Conclusion

Students who are learning English feel more comfortable speaking in small-group settings. Literature circles are a wonderful way to scaffold English learners for this reason. Literature circles also allow fluent English speakers to learn more about students and their cultures in a more intimate way. Through literature circles, all students are able to share what they think and how they feel about books. Teachers invite students to make connections to their own lives and the world around them. Students hear diverse responses, and this helps them to think critically about books. Literature circles encourage a love for literature and positive attitudes toward reading for both English learners and fluent English speakers. Following are closing thoughts about literature circles from some English learners:

I like to go “knee to knee and eye to eye” about the book, because I get to hear other people’s ideas, and I like talking to my friend. (Ruslan, age 11)

What I really think is good about literature circles is that you have time to draw pictures about the story. (Arena, age 10)

I enjoy talking about a book because you get to talk with people not just yourself and your brain. (Pavel, age 9)

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