

## Implementing virtual literature circles for developing English learners' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension



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### ABSTRACT

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Reading comprehension requires language learners to be active and independent. A literature circle is a reading strategy that asserts different roles for students and promotes independence and active learning. The literature circle strategy was invented mainly for face-to-face learning. The spread of online teaching and learning necessitated the development of new teaching methods and learning strategies. In response, the present study adapted and developed the regular face-to-face literature circles into a virtual form to be known as Virtual Literature Circle (VLC) and maintained online. A sample of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners at Qassim University followed the VLCs in reading II during the second semester of the academic year 2022. Strong gains in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension have been documented in the present study. Comparisons of the experimental and the control groups in the pre-test study revealed no significant differences before intervention. After a four-month intervention, the two groups conducted the post-test study. Large significant differences appeared in post-testing suggesting the effectiveness of the VLC strategy followed in developing vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension among EFL learners. The VLCs prove to be effective and suitable for synchronous and asynchronous face-to-screen learning.

**Contribution/ Originality:** To support face-to-screen learning, the current study transformed the traditional literature circle reading strategy into a virtual one. The study also evaluated how well the modified strategy worked to improve the vocabulary and reading comprehension of English language learners.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted face-to-face learning and training to face-to-screen (Moorhouse, 2020) thus, new teaching methods have to replace the regular ones. The present study tries to investigate the effectiveness of literature circles in developing vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension among EFL learners. According to Daniels (2002) Literature circle is a reading process where students read together the same reading text and in small groups, they read, gather information, and share what they gather with other groups.

### 1.1. Roles in Literature Circles

There are different roles in literature circles that may change slightly. Rules in literature circles can be summarized in the following Table 1 (Abdullah, Yee, & Abdul Samat, 2021; Li, Chen, Su, & Yue, 2021).

**Table 1.** Literature circles roles.

No.	Literature circle role	Role description
1	Discussion director	Leads the discussion in the reading classroom
2	Connector	Make the reading setting and connects to the topic
3	Illustrator	Get draws and other tools to facilitate reading
4	Literacy luminary	Identify the aesthetic aspects of the text and specify certain parts from the text to discuss and talk about
5	Word wizard	Identify and explain meanings of words
6	Summarizer	Summarizes the reading text and get conclusions

Source: Abdullah et al. (2021) & Li et al. (2021).

### 1.2. Importance of Literature Circles

Li et al. (2021) mention that literature circles give readers a clear vision of reading and support in-depth reading. As for Cave (2018), literature circles increase collaboration among learners, critical thinking, differentiation, personal connections, exposure to different genres, feedback, and accountability.

Literature circles strategy has a positive affective impact on language learners' reading comprehension. Certo, Moxley, Reffitt, and Miller (2010) realized that elementary-grade students favored the literature circles strategy. Kim (2004) realized that literature circles helped ESL (English Second Language) learners to engage emotionally in English texts. Kong and Fitch (2002) indicated that their 25 fourth and fifth study participants moved from participation rejectors into effective participants. Literature circles enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition (Miller, Straits, Kucan, Trathen, & Dass, 2007). The literature circles strategy is also effective in reading comprehension. McElvain (2010) indicated that 4-6 grade literature circles English learners outperformed control group students in reading comprehension. As for Barone (2013) literature circles increase learners' engagement with the text.

## 2. RELATED WORK

### 2.1. Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Reading among EFL students is not an easy task. For overcoming the reading difficulties Alenizi and Alanazi (2016) tried to increase EFL students' confidence and to create opportunities to let them to develop their reading skills through metacognitive skills. Maasum and Maarof (2012) studied the effectiveness of explicating strategic reading and monitoring to overcome reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners. Maasum and Maarof (2012) introduced a 30 items questionnaire with 41 respondents which indicated a moderate to a high level of metacognitive strategy among the students. A qualitative study on reading comprehension education at the lower-secondary level was conducted by Magnusson (2020). Magnusson (2020) noted the monotony of the reading teaching given and the need to encourage higher order thinking in order to help Indonesian primary and secondary school pupils overcome their reading difficulties. A literature circles training course was offered to 25 teachers from Malang city and 183 teachers from the Kediri district by Anugerahwati, Furaidah, and Noviya (2021). Nearly all participants in the Anugerahwati et al. (2021) study agreed that this method is helpful for comprehending language and developing critical reading skills.

To facilitate reading English texts among EFL students in Taif University, Alaboud (2022) used translation as an effective strategy with the experimental group students. Venegas (2019) case study on a fifth-grade student participated in literature circles revealed that literature circles can foster students' socioemotional and academic learning. Avci and Yuksel (2011) used literature circles to improve the reading comprehension skills of fourth-grade students who had low-level reading comprehension and the strategy proved to be beneficial. Tong, Deng, and Tong (2022) study revealed that weakness in syntactic awareness in led to poor comprehension among Chinese learners

either in their first language or in English second language. In investigating reading comprehension difficulties Capin et al. (2022) reached the conclusion that word reading difficulties in grades 1-4 was the main reason. While Hall et al. (2020) mentioned that inference is the main reason that led to reading comprehension difficulties among 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and inference instruction led to higher performance among 39 participants.

For assessing the correlation between cognitive abilities and reading comprehension difficulties, Capin, Cho, Miciak, Roberts, and Vaughn (2021) reached a conclusion about the associations of lower cognitive performance with reading comprehension difficulties. Martin-Ruiz and González-Valenzuela (2022) reported that there was a need to control the teaching and learning processes of reading comprehension to avoid reading comprehension difficulties. Deng and Tong (2021) study reached a conclusion that suprasegmental phonological awareness is critical for English reading comprehension. For overcoming reading comprehension difficulties, Vaughn et al. (2019) used instructional practices, knowledge acquisition, and team-based learning. Weaver and Kieffer (2022) divided reading comprehension difficulties into general and specific ones that have to be considered while designing courses. Torppa, Vasalampi, Eklund, Sulkunen, and Niemi (2020) associated reading difficulties with learning motivation, school burnout, and school enjoyment.

## 2.2. Reading Comprehension Strategies

For investigating the effectiveness of literature circle in developing EFL learners' reading comprehension and self-monitoring strategies, Chou (2022) conducted his study and found that the experimental group that followed literature circles outperformed the control group in reading comprehension and strategy practices, especially the monitoring strategy. Lubliner and Smetana (2005) emphasized on vocabulary acquisition strategies for developing reading comprehension and documented strong gains in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition among the study group students who followed the vocabulary and reading strategies.

Irawati (2016) conducted quasi-experimental research on 24 students studying an English language intensive course. The results of the study showed that literature circles contributed to developing the experimental group students' reading comprehension. Whitworth (2017) compared a literature circle group with a guided reading group. Comparing the pre-post results of each group; the guided reading group showed a minimal improvement, while the literature circles one showed a substantial amount of growth. Similarly, Hinds (2019) conducted action research on third-grade students which indicated that literature circles had a significant positive impact on reading comprehension. Kassem (2022) investigated the literature circles strategy using a literary reading comprehension test and an online self-regulated language learning skills test. In Kassem (2022) study the experimental group demonstrated a demonstrable level of mastery. Dogan, Yildirim, Cermik, and Ates (2020) observed participation in literature circles for one academic year with 21 preservice teachers with a low or a moderate level of reading habits and demonstrated a good effect on developing the pre-service teachers' reading attitudes. Online literary circles have several advantages and are advised in the teaching of literature, as Abdullah et al. (2021) has shown in a study on 62 pre-service teachers. Additionally, a survey by Berandowski (2013) found that participation in literature circles boosted university students' commitment to and engagement with reading texts.

Osuji (2017) contrasted cognitive and metacognitive approaches to helping ESL readers in Nigeria improve their reading comprehension. Osuji (2017) came to the conclusion that the combination application of cognitive and metacognitive methods significantly improved reading comprehension and vocabulary size. A study by Maryam, Ihrom, and Nurlaelawati (2019) on a sample of 30 first-year EFL students found a favourable link between awareness of metacognitive reading methods and reading comprehension.

Meniado (2016) conducted a study on a group of EFL Saudi students and reported that there was no association between metacognitive reading techniques and reading comprehension, in contrast to earlier findings on reading strategies. Furthermore, Meniado (2016) claimed that motivation for reading and comprehension did not correlate, but that motivation for reading and reading methods did. Eight teachers were given a six-lesson

framework by Medina, Hancock, Hathaway, Pilonieta, and Holshouser (2021), who also found that the participants scored more highly in terms of their familiarity with comprehension techniques. In their 2020 study, Tobia and Bonifacci (2020) compared the frequency with which excellent and poor oral comprehenders used the look-back and memory techniques and came to the conclusion that weak comprehenders used the look-back strategy more frequently. Zano (2020) non-experimental study manipulated the strategy inventory of the language learning questionnaire to reach the conclusion that in South Africa learners use multiple language strategies for reading comprehension. Alenezi (2021) indicated that Saudi EFL learners have a good foundational knowledge of reading strategies and there is a medium correlation between reading strategies knowledge and their beliefs about them. Acosta (2019) reached the conclusion that Spanish learners used their first language strategies while they learn English reading comprehension. Since reading is a cognitive process Mete (2020) engaged the 6<sup>th</sup> grader experimental group in the reading engagement model. Mete (2020) model engaged cooperative discussion, questioning, and note-taking strategies and revealed their efficacy with the experimental group.

According to Valizadeh (2021) study, EFL students who used reading comprehension techniques like previewing, scanning for information, skimming, making inferences, predicting, and summarizing had a reduction in their reading anxiety. Brevik (2019) observed that teachers encourage the use of well-known reading strategies rather than explicitly teaching students new ones, despite the fact that explicit teaching of reading strategies is successful. Klang, Åsman, Mattsson, Nilholm, and Folkryd (2022) mentioned that combining cooperative learning and reading comprehension strategies was effective with 5<sup>th</sup>-grade students. Jakobson, Soodla, and Aro (2022) concluded in their study that teachers lack knowledge about reading comprehension processes and strategies. Knoop-van Campen, Ter Doest, Verhoeven, and Segers (2022) indicated that audio support was effective in developing reading comprehension.

### 2.3. Vocabulary Acquisition

Reviewing the literature, the researcher reached a few studies investigating the relationship between literature circles and vocabulary acquisition. Graham-Marr (2015) study followed literature circles to help Japanese EFL students to enhance and acquire English vocabulary associated with lifestyle and culture. Rahayu (2015) investigated the manipulation of literature circles at a junior high school in Bandung, Indonesia to develop the sample students' vocabulary learning. Dooley (2011) encouraged unmotivated students to learn and acquire science concepts. Dooley (2011) realized that virtual literature circles raised the sample students' awareness and self-monitoring techniques. Widodo (2016) reported that the deployment of virtual literature circles enriched vocabulary learning and usage among Indonesian students.

## 3. EXPERIMENTAL SETTING

The current research was carried out at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia. During the second semester of the academic year 2022, the study lasted for four months. The study involved a group of second-year EFL students, of which 30 served as the Experimental group and 30 as the Control group.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Objectives of the Study

The present study attempted to fulfill the following objectives:

- Evaluating the effectiveness of virtual literature circle (VLC) in developing EFL learners' reading comprehension.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of virtual literature circle (VLC) in developing EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.

## 4.2. Participants

A total number of 60 EFL level 2 students at Qassim University, KSA participated in this study. The participants were divided randomly and equally into Experimental and Control groups.

### 4.2.1. Experimental Group

Sampled and identified 30 students. They studied the reading II course for 15 weeks (3 hrs. per week) with the proposed virtual literature circle (VLC).

### 4.2.2. Control Group

Sampled and identified 30 students. They studied the reading II course for 15 weeks (3 hrs. per week) with the regular teaching method (consecutive loud reading in class and answering questions).

## 4.3. Data Collection Tools

### 4.3.1. Reading Comprehension Test

#### 4.3.1.1. Test Description

The reading comprehension test used in this study comprised three different reading passages. The reading passages tackled different knowledge topics (the future workforce skills, globalization and food and water, air and soil contamination). The reading comprehension questions included true/false, multiple choice, and essay ones.

#### 4.3.1.2. Test Reliability

To check the test reliability, it was administered in a pilot study. Guttman Split-Half Coefficient was 0.8 which indicated the high reliability of the test.

### 4.3.2. Vocabulary Acquisition Test

#### 4.3.2.1. Test Description

The vocabulary acquisition test contained three main questions. The first question was writing the correct term. The second question was writing a definition for certain terms. The final question was to complete the sentences with the given words.

#### 4.3.2.2. Test Reliability

The vocabulary acquisition test was administered in the pilot study and Guttman Split-Half Coefficient was 0.82 to reveal high reliability.

## 4.4. Design and Procedure

One-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were followed in the present study. Scores of the experimental group students in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition tests were compared to Control Group students. To assess the effect of the proposed teaching strategy (virtual literature circle), both the experimental and the control group sat for reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition three times during the academic year 2022. The pretest's main objective was to check the equality of entry-level for both groups. After eight weeks both groups conducted the interim tests and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> week, they conducted the posttests.

## 4.5. Hypotheses

- *Virtual literature circle is effective in developing EFL learners' reading comprehension.*
- *Virtual literature circle is effective in developing EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition.*

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1. Hypothesis 1

#### 5.1.1. Virtual Literature Circle is Effective in Developing EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

The study participants' performance in reading comprehension was examined with one-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA). Multivariate tests (Table 2) indicated significant differences in the three test applications (pretest, interim and posttest)  $F = 81.055$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This shows that the training was effective since multivariate  $\eta^2 = 0.740$ .

Table 2. Multivariate tests.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Reading comprehension	Pillai's trace	0.740	81.055	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.740

One-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) showed an increase in reading comprehension for both the experimental and the control groups in the three periods of test application (Table 3).

Table 3. Means and std. deviation of participants.

Descriptive statistics				
	Groups	Mean	Std. deviation	N
1 Pretest	Control	25.8	5.56	30
	Experimental	25.9	5.15	30
	Total	25.9	5.32	60
2 Interim	Control	28.8	4.51	30
	Experimental	31.7	5.42	30
	Total	30.3	5.16	60
3 Posttest	Control	35.1	6.21	30
	Experimental	38.6	6.42	30
	Total	36.9	6.50	60

Table 3 shows that both the experimental and the control groups were homogenous at the beginning of the study ( $M.=25.8$  and  $25.9$ ). Both groups showed development in reading comprehension in the middle of the study ( $M.=28.8$  and  $31.7$ ) while the experimental was better. Considering post-testing the two groups continued their reading comprehension development with more increase for the experimental one ( $M.=35.1$  and  $38.5$ ).

Pairwise comparisons for the experimental and the control groups following LSD (Least Significant Difference) adjustment were also conducted to compare the achievement of both groups in the pretest, interim, and posttest (Table 4).

Table 4. Groups pairwise comparison.

(I) comprehension	(J) comprehension	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% Confidence interval for difference <sup>b*</sup>	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
1 Pretest	2 Interim	-4.367*	0.623	0.000	-5.614	-3.120
	3 Posttest	-10.950*	0.867	0.000	-12.686	-9.214
2 Interim	1 Pretest	4.367*	0.623	0.000	3.120	5.614
	3 Posttest	-6.583*	0.628	0.000	-7.841	-5.326
3 Posttest	1pretest	10.950*	0.867	0.000	9.214	12.686
	2 Interim	6.583*	0.628	0.000	5.326	7.841

Note: \*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

<sup>b\*</sup> (between two means).

(I) Stands for test setting one.

(J) Stands for test setting two.

(I-J) difference between test setting one and two.



Considering Table 4 data, there is an increase in reading comprehension for both groups with a higher significant increase for the study group. Such a result is indicated by the estimated marginal means of measure (Figure 1).

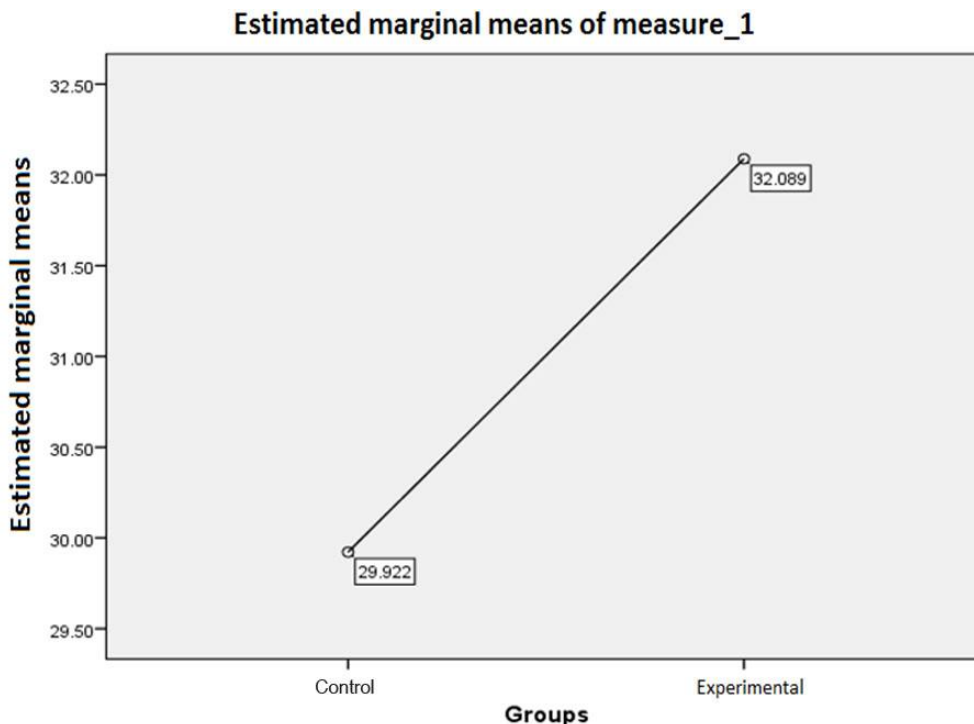


Figure 1. Estimated reading comprehension marginal means.

5.2. Hypothesis 2

5.2.1. Virtual Literature Circle is Effective in Developing EFL Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition

One-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) indicated significant differences between levels. Multivariate tests (Table 5) indicates significant differences in three test applications (pretest, interim and posttest)  $F = 462.1, p < 0.001$ . The training is effective since multivariate  $\eta^2 = 0.750$

Table 5. Multivariate vocabulary acquisition tests.

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Vocabulary acquisition	Pillai's trace	0.942	462.174	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.750

One-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) showed an increase in vocabulary acquisition for both the experimental and the Control Groups in the three periods of test application (Table 6).

Table 6. Means and std. deviation of participants.

Descriptive statistics				
	Groups	Mean	Std. deviation	N
1 Pretest	Control	8.46	2.22	30
	Experimental	8.40	2.01	30
	Total	8.43	2.10	60
2 Interim	Control	10.8	2.76	30
	Experimental	11.2	2.17	30
	Total	11.01	2.47	60
3 Posttest	Control	13.3	2.30	30
	Experimental	15.0	2.01	30
	Total	14.1	2.30	60

Table 6 shows that both the experimental and the Control Groups were homogenous at the beginning of the study (M.=8.46 and 8.4). Both groups showed development in vocabulary acquisition in the middle of the study (M.=10.8 and 11.2) while the experimental was better. Considering post testing the two groups continued their vocabulary acquisition with more increase for the experimental one (M.=13.3 and 15.0).

Pairwise comparisons for the experimental and the Control Groups following LSD adjustment were also conducted to compare the achievement of both groups in the pretest, interim, and posttest (Table 7).

Table 7. Groups pairwise comparison.

(I) Vocabulary	(J) Vocabulary	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% Confidence interval for difference <sup>b*</sup>	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
1 Pretest	2 Interim	-2.583*	0.252	0.000	-3.089	-2.078
	3 Posttest	-5.733*	0.201	0.000	-6.136	-5.331
2 Interim	1 Pretest	2.583*	0.252	0.000	2.078	3.089
	3 Posttest	-3.150*	0.194	0.000	-3.537	-2.763
3 Posttest	1pretest	5.733*	0.201	0.000	5.331	6.136
	2 Interim	3.150*	0.194	0.000	2.763	3.537

Note: \*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.  
<sup>b\*</sup> (between two means)  
 (I) Stands for test setting one  
 (J) Stands for test setting two  
 (I-J) Difference between test setting one and two

Considering Table 7 data, there is increasement in vocabulary acquisition for both groups with a higher significant increasement for the study group. Such a result is indicated by the estimated marginal means of measure (Figure 2).

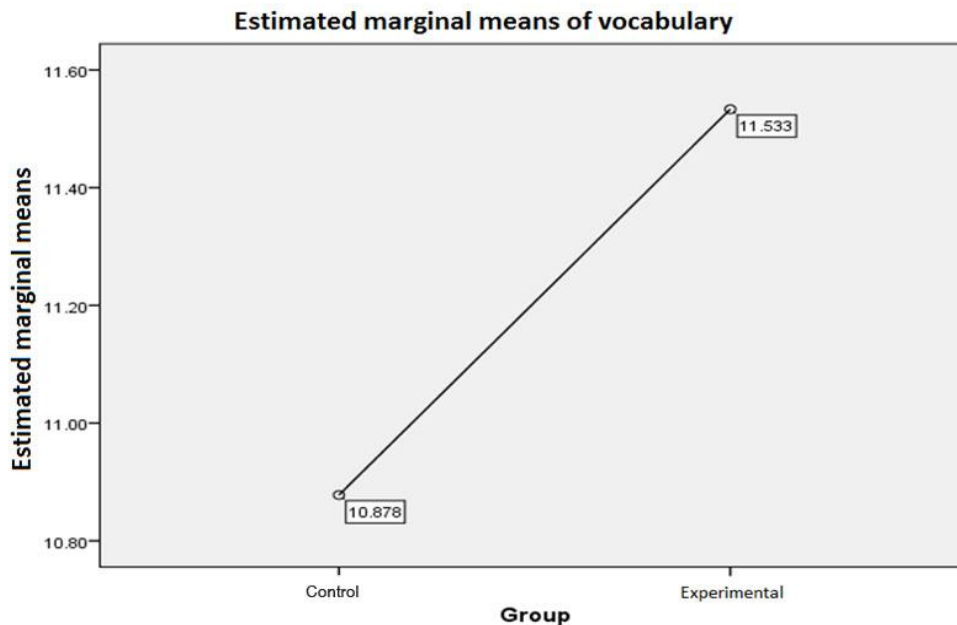


Figure 2. Estimated vocabulary acquisition marginal means.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

EFL learners need more engagement in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. In regular reading sessions, the learners sit passively while the teacher introduces new words, wherein the major reading strategy is the loud reading method. Although EFL learners listen attentively they have passive roles in reading sessions. EFL learners need to prepare certain reading tasks in advance. They also need certain roles that go with their interests.

Distance learning because of the pandemic COVID 19 necessitated new teaching and learning strategies. Regular teaching and learning methods are incompatible with online learning. The loud reading strategy and the



regular way of introducing vocabulary become insufficient. Consequently, the Virtual Literature Circle (VLC) strategy was adopted in the present study to teach reading comprehension and enhance vocabulary acquisition.

The experimental group students followed the literature circle in the reading II course. They were divided into six subgroups; each group has a certain role (discussion director, literary luminary, vocabulary enricher, summarizer, illustrator, or connector). The main tasks of each group are presented by the teacher in the first lecture. Each group contacts electronically at home and prepares their tasks for the next lecture. During the electronic reading lecture, the teacher directs each group to present the required tasks.

The experimental group students were more active and independent during reading lectures. Learners prepared the required tasks in advance and did their best in the preparation phase. The connector tried to introduce the reading task and used visual aids. The discussion group led the discussion about reading text. The vocabulary enricher introduced the new vocabulary with varied aids. Literary luminary presented the varied linguistic features of the text. The Illustrator group facilitated any reading comprehension difficulties. Finally, the summarizer summarized the reading text.

Virtual literature circle led to more independence and interaction among the experimental group students. During the electronic reading comprehension lectures, the learners were more interactive. The learners tried to be more creative in their roles. They presented their roles with the help of technology and media. Thus, virtual literature circle strategy proved to be more effective in developing vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension among EFL learners.

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