THE INFLUENCE OF VIRTUAL LITERATURE CIRCLES ON STUDENTS' LITERARY COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Despite being previously exposed to literature for many years during secondary school, Malaysian International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma students tussle to cope with the English syllabus outlined by the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO). This is mainly due to the different instructional objectives of learning literature in Malaysia as compared to the IB Diploma's. In short, students are not trained within the remit of the two key literary competence skills, which are literary reading comprehension and analysis as they progress to a more challenging post-secondary syllabus as such the IB Diploma Programme. Hence, this study investigates how virtual literature circles provide optimal learning opportunities to promote IB Diploma students' literary competence in reading literature. The research questions focused on the ways that virtual literature circles are able to support students' literary competence, as well as their experiences upon participating in the discussions.

Methodology: A mixed-method research design was employed in carrying out the aims of the study. Quantitative data were collected through a quasi-experimental method focusing on two groups of IB Diploma students in the experimental and control groups. One-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to determine whether there are any significant differences between the independent groups on the dependent variable, which is literary competence, whilst controlling for the effects of their initial abilities which co-vary with the dependent variable. The qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and the data analysis was conducted using principles of thematic analysis.

Findings: This study found that virtual literature circles enhanced IB Diploma students' literary competence by encouraging them to become critical readers of literature. It also provides students with

the avenue to develop their literary reading comprehension and analysis skills in order to understand, analyse, and interpret literature critically.

Contributions: This research aids in the design and implementation of virtual literature circles as a socially mediated reading approach to assisting ESL students with their literary competence.

Keywords: Virtual literature circles, literary competence, literary reading comprehension skill, literary analysis skill, IB Diploma.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading and interpreting literature goes beyond the process of understanding meaning, for there are more complex processes involved. Culler (2002) believes that a person's language awareness and vast experience of the world do not necessarily reflect him or her as a competent reader. It is argued that in order for students to benefit from reading literature in the classroom fully, they are required to become critical readers of literature. Culler (2002) also argues that engaging in literary reading requires an "implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for" (p. 132), thus implying that readers require a specific unique set of linguistic repertoire and skills to enhance their understanding of literary works. He refers to this ability as literary competence, which supports a reader's aptitude to convert meaning beyond the written texts into comprehensible interpreted meanings.

Literary competence includes a number of sub-skills that should be identified in order to support students' literary competence and when dealing with the reading of literature. The two most important skills are literary reading comprehension and literary analysis skills. The two skills involve students' attitude and perception towards the literary world, cultural knowledge of the literary work, literary criticism skill, and the ability to respond creatively to literary works. Furthermore, the two skills also allow students to identify, interpret and appreciate the values of the distinctive features and idiosyncrasies present in a literature text. Most simply, literary competence means that students are able to decipher meanings based on their well-built implicit understanding of, and familiarity with certain conventions from pages of literary works and convert them into literary understanding (Culler, 2011). Hence, it is of paramount importance for teachers to guide students to connect their literary interpretative

skills through an incessant patient practice of their personal literary competence to eventually become critical readers of literature. One of the best ways to achieve this is through the use of literature circles in the classroom.

Literature circles are a literature-based instructional strategy as part of critical literacy pedagogy that is widely used today in encouraging students to engage with literature in the classroom (Daniels, 2002). Also, literature circles do not only provide students with a medium to appreciate literature, but also encourage them to express opinions, make predictions, and question specific literature in a productive and structured way (Anderson, 2008; Daniels, 2002), which is highly suitable to be used to promote students' literary competence. Furthermore, riding the crest of globalisation and technological advancement, the modern-day furtherance has made it possible for educators to adapt the classic literature circles and make them available virtually through online communication known as the virtual literature circles. Considering the benefits these instructional approaches have on literature, the research objectives of the study are: (1) to investigate the effect of virtual literature circles on students' literary competence, and (2) to explore students' experiences of participating in virtual literature circles. The null hypothesis of the study is as follows:

HO1: There is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups' literary competence in the post test scores.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Literary Competence

Literary competence was introduced by Jonathan Culler (1975), and it refers to a reader's ability to internalise the knowledge of the rules of literature. Culler (2000) further defines literary competence as "the implicit knowledge that readers and writers bring to their encounters with texts" (p. 62), in which readers learn to manoeuvre themselves with literary conventions in order to "allow them to take the words of the page of a play or other literary work and convert them into literary meaning" (Lazar, 1993, p. 12). Culler (2002) also believed that relying merely on the reader's language competence and experience will not be sufficient, as reading literature without being literarily competent would only allow readers to understand words and the linguistic aspect of the texts, but not the underlying messages and the author's real intention (Culler, 2002). Thus, literary competence plays an integral part in reading literature.

Moreover, apart from presenting the readers with the linguistic comprehension and understanding of meaning through words, literary competence is also argued to contain valuable aesthetic properties that readers need to be able to appreciate (Brumfit & Carter, 2000; Duff & Maley, 2003; Spiro, 1991). In this case, literary competence can help ESL readers appreciate, enjoy, empathise, and respond emotionally to these 'arcane' conventions of literary language, amongst which are genre, tone, writing styles, techniques and figurative language (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Spiro, 1991). Thus, Kusch (2016) believed that a competent reader of literature is able to achieve the ultimate goal of reading literature, which is to allow one to feel the joy and distress in the stories they read, comprehend the cultural values, lyrical reflections and finally engage with the author's hearts and minds to ultimately connect the intended messages. Therefore, in the context of learning literature for ESL learners, it is even more critical for students to be taught to recognise these challenges and conventions, and they need to be introduced to "some skills which make up literary competence" (Lazar, 1993, p. 13).

Henceforth, as literary competence is primarily a cognitive style and a way of thinking about literary discourse to better comprehend and analyse literature, the two skills that teachers should be developing in order to promote students' literary competence are literary reading comprehension and analysis skills. These two skills reassure students' implicit understanding of and familiarity with certain conventions, which would ultimately allow them to take the words and convert them into literary meaning (Culler, 2002; Lazar, 1993). For example, when competent readers are given a novel or a play, they will be using the two literary conventions to understand the literature that is being read.

Literary competence; therefore, is said to involve "the ability to respond and also the ability to account for that response" (Prahaladaiah, 2018, p. 10). Hence, analysing literature in the classroom requires students to employ ways to "bridge individual, emotional responses and to go beyond subjectivity to uncover new insights about the meanings of various texts" (Kusch, 2016, p. 6). This is where the importance of readers' literary reading comprehension skills comes in, where readers' ability to comprehend a text is further enhanced and developed in order to help build a foundation for their literary analysis – they complement each other. In a way, readers are actively building on critically analysing literature based on their literary comprehension of the text read. The two skills depend on one another to create competent and critical readers of literature. Without an ample understanding of the intended meaning implied by the authors, students will not be able to read between the lines, nor appreciate the values of the written work.

2.2 Review of Related Theory

The theoretical framework in this study defined the particular interests and points of view identified in regard to the research's hypotheses, from which the research questions were generated. In particular, this study drew from Rosenblatt's reader-response theory (Rosenblatt, 1968) as the base of its study. Rosenblatt's theory claims that a text has no meaning until a reader comes along and brings it to life (Rosenblatt, 1982). The idea is that the 'response' that student shows or reacts to when reading is contingent upon their experiences, and other socio-cultural contexts and factors such as social, cultural, religious and political beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds and other external factors (Galda & Beach, 2001). This influence will lead the reader to confront the "causes of human actions and social condition" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 126). Therefore, Rosenblatt (1982) believes that there are many ways a reader can approach a text, there is no 'one correct way' to interpret, and interpretations of a text are largely dependent on the personal experiences of each individual reader. Probst (1988) developed the theory further and claimed that meaning resides in the person rather than in the dictionary. He believed that "a word comes to mean something to us through our repeated experiences with it in various circumstances" and "it is the sum, or the residue, or the abstraction of those experiences that constitutes the meaning of the word" (Probst, 1988, p. 72), claiming that for students to be able to analyse a work of literature, they must first relate the work to themselves and their own experiences before they can analyse the work on a higher level. Hence, both critical literacy and reader response emphasises social influence on the literacy experiences.

Hence, reader-response theory juxtaposes students' opportunities to challenge themselves and their peers with appropriate reading materials and discussion with students of similar abilities (Soares, 2009). As such, virtual literature circles are seen as a viable avenue for readers to practice connecting their inner literary knowledge and personal experiences to the fiction being read, whilst at the same time taking into consideration of others' opinions and the manner that their friends interpret the text. Furthermore, active participation and discussion with their friends would also encourage the students to open up and share information in a way that does not only improve comprehension, but also could potentially raise their interest in reading.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study investigates how the use of critical pedagogy in the socially mediated practice of virtual literature circles functioned as an optimal learning approach to promote students'

literary competence. At the methodological level, a mixed-method research design was employed to obtain rich information from the subjects of the study. Quantitative data were obtained through a quasi-experimental research design that aimed to investigate the influence of virtual literature circles on students' literary competence, whilst qualitative data were collected via semi-structured interviews to explore students' experiences.

As for the quantitative data collection process, a quasi-experimental design with two groups of pre-test and post-test was employed in the study. The sample used for the study was a non-randomisation purposive sampling with students from one of the International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools in Malaysia, who were selected to participate in the study. Each group consists of 20 *English B* students, totalling 40 overall participants ($n = 40$). With the school being one of the *Apple* schools in the country, access to instructional equipment necessary to participate in a virtual discussion, such as the *iPad*, was not a problem as most students have already owned one, or can always loan it from the school's library. Also, understanding that these students are currently pursuing their IB Diploma, they can be characterised as high-achieving students with good communication and written skills, but not necessarily in the knowledge of literature. Nevertheless, being students of literature, these students were assumed to have been exposed to basic literature knowledge, such as literary devices and features before the research was conducted.

The two groups had read the same literary works in class, whilst receiving two different treatment conditions, virtual literature circles and a conventional literature study approach. The research was carried out for the duration of ten weeks. Students' literary competence for both control and experimental groups was assessed in a pre-test, followed by a post-test after eight weeks of intervention. All students sat for the same post-test upon the completion of the target novels. Discussions were mainly conducted virtually through *Google Docs* – a free web-based application accessible online, and *Apple*'s *Notes* – a notetaking app developed by *Apple*. The two apps were chosen, as they both allow for synchronous and asynchronous discussion to take place. Students were required to participate in a mandatory discussion synchronously, with the teacher's presence once a week. However, they were also encouraged to meet and discuss of their own accord at any given time, either synchronously or asynchronously. As for the qualitative research design, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with five randomly selected participants from the experimental group.

To assess the effectiveness of virtual literature circles on student's literary competence, the research employed a combination of an existing administrated instrument reading comprehension questions and a newly developed test of literary analysis of an unfamiliar text,

adapted from the IB Diploma Programme *English B* subject for the pre-test and post-test of the quasi-experimental research design. Semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researcher to explore students' experiences of participating in virtual literature circles. Both instruments were validated and tested for reliability prior to their implementation, as part of the research procedure.

The data collected from the literary competence of pre-test and post-tests were analysed quantitively using IBM SPSS version 27.0. A one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypothesis, with the pre-test score acting as the covariate and the post-test scores as the dependent variables. ANCOVA was used in order to control the pre-existing variable that exists in the groups (Mills & Gay, 2019), which was students' initial literary abilities that somewhat differed from each other prior to the treatment. Also, qualitative data analysis was conducted on the data collected from the interview. The data obtained were recorded, and were then transcribed verbatim using McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) transcription protocol developed for thematic analyses. The transcribed verbatim was then reviewed and proofread for accuracy at least two times. These qualitative data were then analysed using thematic analysis, according to the theming and coding procedure.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Before proceeding to the statistical analysis, the data were examined based on the appropriate assumptions. As a result, the data collected had met all the assumptions of the study, in which the statistical analysis of one-way ANCOVA was able to be conducted. On the other hand, the qualitative data that will be used to support the quantitative findings were thematically analysed, and inter-rater reliability was conducted to improve the trustworthiness of the findings.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

A one-way ANCOVA was used to analyse the effect of virtual literature circles on students' literary analysis skills, whilst controlling for the pre-test scores as the covariate. Table 1 shows the literary analysis means before (pre-test) and after the treatment was implemented (post-test). The table also indicates the standard error (*SE*) and two types of post-test means (*M*) which are unadjusted mean and adjusted mean scores.

Table 1: Unadjusted and covariate adjusted descriptive statistics for literary competence

Treatment	Before Treatment			After Treatment (Unadjusted)		After Treatment (Adjusted)	
	N	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*
Experimental	20	11.30	.476	14.00	.503	13.87	.281
Control	20	10.95	.438	12.35	.379	12.48	.281

After controlling for the covariate, a comparison of the adjusted means shows that the virtual literature group still had a higher mean than the conventional teaching group. Table 2 shows a one-way ANOVA table with the covariate included.

Table 2: Results of one-way analysis of covariance for literary competence

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p	ηp^2
Pre-test (Covariate)	92.528	1	92.528	59.004	.000	.615
Group	18.984	1	18.984	12.106	.000	.247
Error	58.022	37	1.568			

a. R Squared = .674 (Adjusted R Squared = .656)

After adjusting for the covariate, there was a significant difference in the post-test scores between the experimental group's virtual literature circles and the control group's conventional teaching approach, $F(1, 37) = 12.11$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, the p-value of the covariate valued at less than .001 ($p < .05$) indicates that the covariate is a significant predictor of the dependent variable. Hence, the results also indicate that the null hypothesis was rejected. Finally, the effect size of the treatment indicated by the value of partial eta squared ($\eta p2 = .25$), indicates that approximately 25% of the variance in the dependent variables is explained by the independent variable (small to medium effect). Thus, the value indicates a moderate relationship between virtual literature circles and students' literary analysis skills whilst controlling for their initial abilities. Therefore, based on the statistical findings, virtual literature circles were substantiated to be an effective approach to improving students' literary competence.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

A general inductive approach to thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data in order to identify the themes in the textual data related to the research objective. After closely analysing the data collected from the participants, two main dimensions of themes emerged,

which are: (1) benefits and (2) challenges to virtual literature circles. The two dimensions were further defined and extended into several themes and subthemes that were categorised according to their mutual dimension as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes and subthemes relationship

Dimensions	Themes	Subthemes
Benefits	Experiences	Enjoyable new experience
		Flexibility and accessibility
	Social	Collaborative learning
	Cognitive	Critical reading
Challenges	Technical	Technological limitation
		Lost in translation
	Practical	Diffusion of responsibility

4.2.1 Benefits of Virtual Literature Circles

The first cluster of themes derived from the qualitative data is the benefits of participating in virtual literature circles. The dimension consists of three corresponding main themes, which are benefits to students' learning including: (1) experience, (2) social, and (3) cognitive. These themes meaningfully reflect the five sub-themes that will be discussed further in the following sub-headings.

4.2.1.1 Enjoyable new experience

Firstly, all five participants affirmed that they enjoyed participating in virtual literature circles, and it was remarked as a pleasant new experience for all of them. These participants indicated that it was a unique first-time experience in learning literature. Participating in virtual literature circles had also helped painted a positive outlook towards learning literature in general, as reported by the two participants, *"… I enjoy because not only do… Because this is my first-time studying literature, I notice that studying literature is not just about knowing what's inside the book, it's knowing also, outside of the book…"* (P2) and *"All in all, it is very, it is a new experience for me… It has been very interesting. How we could, how we could talk with each other just to do this project and analyse this literature."* (P5).

These interview participants were also able to contrast their experience of learning literature over virtual literature circles with a traditional classroom approach to learning literature. They agreed that it had been a great shift and an eye-opening experience for them,

as indicated by one of the participants: "*And it's a new experience because prior to that we're more used to more hands-on, face to face… So, it's interesting to try out this this new method…*" (P3). Thus, by adopting a positive outlook towards virtual literature circles, all five participants agreed that virtual literature circles were a valuable experience for them.

4.2.1.2 Flexibility and accessibility

The second sub-theme identified was the benefits of flexibility and accessibility that virtual literature circles had towards students' learning experience. Participants reported that meeting virtually provided them with a unique flexible learning experience because they could access and engage in their literary discussion from anywhere and at any given time. They also appreciated the flexibility and convenience of not having to physically be on the school campus to actively engage in their discussion:

> "*I see that… it is very advantages … Each of us lives around hundreds of kilometres away from each other, but we are still able to connect and do our project despite the distance. So that we could finish the literature and analyse it better.*" (P5)

4.2.1.3 Collaborative learning

The third sub-theme outlines the social values towards learning that underpin the concept of collaborative learning. All five participants indicated that they participated actively in the collaborative process, and had managed to work well together, primarily because they enjoyed the process of working with their friends, and actively discussing and sharing information with their peers, as indicated by one of the participants:

> "*I think it's a collaborative work because we work together to identify the issues and themes in the novel. And from the themes and issues we brainstorm the… what is the global… global issues relate to the themes of the novel. And how that?... How that issue? Give the message to the readers.*" (P1)

Furthermore, it was specifically highlighted that working collaboratively in dissecting a piece of literature eases the process of analysing. Virtual literature circles generally had the students grasp the concept and ideas presented in the novel easily and fast due to the active discussion that had taken place, as stated by the participants, *"… it's easier to get a general picture of the novel more quickly, because what the members do is just share… and we can just, we can just*

read it through and understand their perspectives…" (P3). Whilst another participant claimed that: *"With the help, the help of my friends. Yes. Because they help… identify some of the issues that I couldn't identify, so it's… it's… it's helpful."* (P2).

Working collaboratively correspondingly had the ability to provide valuable peer feedback. All five interview participants agreed that peer feedback allowed them to gain an understanding of their own work, as well as the work of their peers, which led to critical discussion and comprehensive analysis of literature: "*I enjoy the fact that I can easily refer to my, my own understanding and also compared with my other classmates, and maybe develop a deeper understanding of the literary piece.*" (P4)

The proponents of collaborative learning claimed that the active exchange of ideas within the circles not only increases interest among the participants, but also promotes thinking. The interviews also revealed that working collaboratively fostered interdependence, supported learning and encouraged students to become reflective practitioners.

4.2.1.4 Critical reading

The next theme is the benefits towards students' cognitive performance. Students' cognitive attributes refer to students' ability to construct knowledge attributable to their learning experiences (Mayer, 2011). In this present research, all five participants generally acknowledged virtual literature circles' ability to enhance and deepen their understanding of their reading of literature. They perceived the discussion they had to be critical and meaningful, and these were based on the interaction and quality of discussion that they had during the virtual meetings. "*I'd say the discussions I personally had with the rest of my classmates were deep and meaningful*" (P4). "V*irtual literature circles do help getting better understanding on the novel"* (P3).

More importantly, the participant also indicated that discussing through virtual literature circles helped him and his friends internalise literature using their well-built knowledge of literature. In a way, he valued the opportunity to be able to interact in discussion using the knowledge of literature such as literary devices, themes, characters and plot to name a few. Doing so had also allowed him and his friends to be critical and analytical, especially in exploring the author's mind and intended messages:

"… it helps us to structurise our thinking, from the… big theme or character to the small, small message and issues, the specific issue or events in the novel. So that from the little circles itself it gives us impact to our everyday lives and how… it helps us to interact with the author's mind in is novel." (P1)

Virtual literature circles had also been able to support and promote students' critical thinking and critical analysis skills:

"My role is connecter where I… I… I study, how… how the issues in any literature device relates with the readers and… and that, that creates questions. That creates… well… that creates questions that people wonder. Ahh… like when we read issues, we tend to think what caused these issues and what were the effects of these issues? (P2)

Thus, virtual literature circles enriched students' learning outcomes by providing them with opportunities to be part of a critical discussion. In contrast, through evaluation and sharing of ideas of team members, it fostered critical thinking and problem-solving skills by promoting discussion, clarification, and evaluation of ideas.

4.2.2 Challenges to Virtual Literature Circles

The next set of themes to emerge from a culmination of patterns represented across the study's qualitative data was students' perceived challenges when participating in virtual literature circles. The two themes are: (1) technical and (2) practical challenges to virtual literature circles. The following section discusses the three sub-themes derived from the two main themes.

4.2.2.1 Technological limitation

Firstly, as much as virtual literature circles were able to enhance students' experiences towards learning literature, students also experienced many challenges in regard to the virtual learning approach. One of the significant predicaments that resonated with all five interviewed participants was the technical limitation of virtual literature circles.

Firstly, they commented that internet connectivity was a major hindrance when participating in the virtual discussion. This was particularly the case for students residing in areas, where there was a slow dial-up network connection or who did not have access to a stable Wi-Fi connection at home. As such, two of the participants indicated that they had to resort to

using mobile phones as broadband or hotspot, which had certainly incurred more problems, such as the cost of subscribing to the expensive internet data connection. They claimed that *"… the Internet was a bit of a problem, so every time I tried to connect to virtual class. It can take like a couple of minutes…"* (P4) and *"… also if certain people do not have Wi-Fi, they have to use their data and it will cost a lot…"* (P5).

Secondly, all five participants faced problems when discussing synchronously. Students had issues with the online platform that was used as a medium of discussion – Google Docs. As such, typing out comments and responses had its own shortcomings, in which response time was delayed, and timely informative feedback was not rightfully achieved, as reported:

> *"…if we were using the virtual literature circles. Since we were… since we tend to do it in our leisure time. Members have a… how to say this, members will have a longer time waiting for the other members' comments… if that that makes sense."* (P3)

This inability to have timely responses had forfeited their opportunity to have a more in-depth discussion. Participants reported that the lag in response time killed the momentum of a back-and-forth discussion, and had sometimes led to various forms of misunderstandings among the group members. Their plights are as indicated:

> "*But, when… when we, when you focus on convenience and prompt discussions, we tend to sacrifice a deeper an in-depth understanding on the, on the contents of the novel so that I think that… that maybe lacked… that may be what's lacking from virtual literature circles."* (P3)

Thus, whilst the internet has helped bridge the students together virtually, it had not been a pleasant experience for some students who struggled with the inevitable technological consequences of discussing virtually. One way or another, technological limitations posed a threat to students' overall experiences of virtual literature circles due to their inability to achieve optimum functionality.

4.2.2.2 Lost in translation

Another prominent technical challenge to discussing virtually was the looming limits to online communication. The lack of physical cues in the online discussion led to various forms of

miscommunication among the students. Without facial expressions and gestures, nor the ability to retract immediately, all five participants indicated that they struggled at analysing emotions, and were confronted with exertions at conveying their intended message. This is as commented by one participant:

> "*I find that it… it hard to express the… our emotions and our thinking, is because we… we, we need to express our thinking in terms of typing, in terms of words and compared to when we talk to each other, we can seem to analyse this emotion and his thinking so we can rephrase how, how my friend feels about the novel… I find it a bit hard to… to arrange my sentence to get to the point of the novel.*" (P1)

Moreover, interacting through synchronous tools, such as chat, presented more difficulties because of the imminent constraint of verbalising the thought that came to their minds. Predominantly relying on inputting text can be challenging for many, as it took longer to respond by typing than a verbal conversation. All five participants particularly found it difficult to reply to all the points in a message. In turn, they tend to easily leave some questions unattended and uncommunicated.

> "*I think that actually hinders understanding between their members because from what we do… is we did through Google Docs. So… so the only way we could communicate at the time was through the chat box in the Google Docs. So, just through that, I think that we failed to really understand what the members are trying to say. I think that's the main problem with it.*" (P3)

Since communication was problematic, the collaborative discussion was not able to function at an optimal level. Thus, with all the said problems, participants commented that virtual discussion to an extent could potentially hinder communication and meaning.

4.2.2.3 Diffusion of responsibility

The final challenge that students faced in discussing virtually reflected the theme of practical challenges. In particular, three of the five participants highlighted the issue in regard to the diffusion of responsibility. Diffusion of responsibility refers to the members of a particular group that were less likely to take responsibility as other individuals could also be held accountable for the same action (Darley & Latané, 1968; Fischer et al., 2011). In this research,

the three participants indicated that some students tend not to play their assigned roles or asserted that their roles were less significant compared to the other group members. "*… there are some roles that don't play its part...*" (P2). "*I think personally because there's a tendency to do notes in our own leisure time. There's a higher chance of me not contributing as much as I would in a face, in a face-to-face discussion*" (P3). In the context of a virtual discussion, diffusion of responsibility was largely due to happen when the member felt less responsible for taking action in a given situation. They instead waited for someone else to act. In a way, they felt that it was permissible to do so as they were communicating online, which had detrimentally affected the overall outcome of the discussion.

4.3 Discussion

Findings obtained from this study revealed significant improvements in students' literary competence after the implementation of virtual literature circles. Statistically, the post-test mean scores of the experimental group were significantly higher than that of the control group after controlling for the covariate. The significant results of the study indicated that virtual literature circles enabled the students to understand literary texts better than they previously could. This suggests that virtual literature circles as a reading approach help ESL students comprehend literary reading and achieve various desirable reading outcomes upon learning literature.

From the implementation of virtual literature circles, students were provided with opportunities to read, discuss, question, and make personal connections from their own experiences that had greatly helped in supporting their ability to comprehend literary texts, such as in making inferences, predicting and summarising for their understanding as previously argued in the literature review. More importantly, the results also provided a positive outlook on students' ability to comprehend meaning when presented with the reading components exclusively found in literary texts, such as the unique language of literature and intrinsic elements of literature. Hence, virtual literature circles have helped to introduce students to a multidimensional and complex interaction between them as a reader with the author, language, messages and cultural context of the literature.

This resonates with Rosenblatt's theoretical perspectives on reading literature, in which she argued that reading is a two-way interaction between the reader and the text, dynamic and recursive, instead of static (Rosenblatt, 1982). During the process, both the reader and the text are important agents for meaning-making in the reading process. The findings obtained in this present study justified Rosenblatt's perspective as literature circles allowed students to deepen

and extend their initial comprehension through active and critical communication with their peers. In a way, as students read and internalised the knowledge and information during the discussion, they were prompted with the opportunity to critically scrutinise and question the texts and all its textual elements such as the language, meaning and even specific difficult intrinsic elements of literature. Therefore, as Rosenblatt's transactional theory would argue, students negotiated and constructed meaning by making predictions, inferring, generating questions, and eliciting connections, which ultimately contributed to their overall text comprehension (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Moreover, students' ability to better comprehend these arcane languages and foreign intrinsic aspects of literature can be explained by assigning individual unique roles in literature circles. Additionally, the findings obtained from this research substantiated virtual literature circles' potential at recognising the reader's role and include elements that "inherently welcome, celebrate, and build upon students' responses to what they read" (Daniels, 2022, p. 35). Likewise, the qualitative findings have discussed how students cited collaborative and cooperative learning as having some of the biggest contributions to their ability to do so. Students also agreed that discussion through virtual literature circles allowed them to engage in rich, meaningful, student-directed dialogue about literary novels they had read, which promoted literacy growth for all of them. The positive attitude that they had towards their experiences of participating in the reading circles is also potentially one of the main factors contributing to the success of the treatment. If students perceived literature circles as meaningful, enjoyable, and relevant to their lives, they were more apt to be fully engaged and learnt more from the experiences (Boor, 2015). Previous studies conducted with regard to virtual literature circles and reading comprehension also discovered similar findings, in which these researchers found that their students employed various comprehension strategies of reading that ranged from predicting and questioning to making personal connections with the text. Similarly in this study, students indicated that they were provided with the vast opportunities to self-reflect on what they had read and taken their time to meaningfully discuss and slowly engage with the reading process to better comprehend the meaning behind each text.

Finally, the study concludes that by participating in virtual literature circles, students were able to read between the lines and dealt with the challenges to literary analysis that came in the form of language semantics, semiotic signs and cultural knowledge, as presented in the review of the literature. Inferring from the student interviews, whilst all these may sound daunting to the students at first, they nevertheless indicated that virtual literature circles were

able to provide them with numerous open-ended possibilities that had enabled them to interact with the literary texts and worked on finding their personal voice to analyse, argue and give meaning to the texts. Moreover, students also made particular reference to virtual literature circles' ability to provide a practical and pragmatic roadmap to analysing these literary works. Students stated that virtual literature circles provided them with the analytical structure and helped them structure their understanding and analysis of literary works. This indirectly resulted in the students' activating previous knowledge of literature to develop their critical reading ability.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to evaluate the influence of virtual literature circles on students' literary competence. Findings obtained from this study revealed that participating in virtual literature circles was statistically effective in leading to better performance, with regards to students' literary competence, compared to the literary study approach to learning literature. Virtual literature had created a conducive learning environment for students to improve their literary competence. This indicates that through this innovative reading instruction, students learnt to approach literary texts from multiple reading perspectives, successfully engaged in a collaborative discussion and interpreted meanings of the literary texts that deepened their comprehension and analysis skills. It can also be concluded that virtual literature circles were a comprehensive pedagogical approach that seeks to enhance students' ability to construct and justify their responses and to critically reassess their expectations as to the meaning of the text, as well as paved the way for them to read between the lines without the constraint of misinterpreting a text's semantic, semiotic and cultural rhetoric. Conclusively, virtual literature circles had successfully helped students afford a rich opportunity to develop reading at literal, inferential, and critical levels. Thus, having been empirically and analytically validated, virtual literature circles appear to be a promising instructional reading approach to learning literature. Therefore, virtual literature circles could be a stupendous addition to ESL reading classes to improve students' literary competence.

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