

The use of literature in the EFL classroom: Students' perception

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Kirjallisuutta ja lukupiirejä on käytetty englannin kielen opetuksessa jo vuosikymmenten ajan. Tämä ei ole yllättävää, sillä niillä on monia kielen opiskelijoille hyödyllisiä ominaisuuksia. Kirjallisuus tarjoaa opiskelijoille autenttista materiaalia opiskellulla kohdekielellä ja kehittää samalla heidän kielitaitoaan ja kulttuurista tietämystään. Lukupiirit kannustavat opiskelijoita keskustelemaan kirjallisuudesta ja jakamaan henkilökohtaisia kokemuksiaan turvallisessa ympäristössä, mikä motivoi heitä lukemaan ja puhumaan vieraalla kielellä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tarkastella opiskelijoiden kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä kirjallisuuden sekä lukupiirien käytöstä englannin kielen opiskelussa. Tutkimus toteutettiin kyselytutkimuksena, johon vastasi yhteensä 28 englannin pääaineopiskelijaa suomalaisesta sekä chileläisestä yliopistosta. Toisena tavoitteena oli tarkastella, mitä eroavaisuuksia ja yhtäläisyyksiä suomalaisten ja chileläisten opiskelijoiden mielipiteissä voidaan havaita ja mistä ne voisivat johtua.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että opiskelijoiden kokemukset kirjallisuuden käytöstä englannin kielen opiskelussa vaihtelevat suuresti. Lukeminen ja kirjallisuuden analysointi englanniksi koettiin usein haastavaksi sen takia, ettei opiskelijoilla ollut siitä tarpeeksi kokemusta. Lukupiirityöskentelyyn suhtauduttiin positiivisesti ja monet opiskelijat toivoivat lisää ryhmätyöskentelyä kirjallisuuden opiskeluun. Suomalaisille opiskelijoille englanninkielinen kirjallisuus ja ryhmätyöskentely olivat tutumpia kuin chileläisille, mutta yleisesti opiskelijoiden kokemukset olivat samankaltaisia.</p> <p>Tutkimustulosten perusteella voidaan kehittää kirjallisuuden käyttöä toisen asteen englannin kielen opetuksessa Suomessa ja Chilessä. Lisäksi ne auttavat ymmärtämään paremmin, millaisia taitoja englanninkielisen pääaineopiskelijoilla on heidän tullessaan yliopistoon ja millaisia vaikeuksia he kohtaavat englanninkielisen kirjallisuuden kanssa. Näihin kysymyksiin pureutumalla yliopistot voisivat kehittää englanninkielisen kirjallisuuskursseja opiskelijoille sopivammiksi.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching literature and literary analysis for the students of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) has been part of the English language education for decades and is perceived as highly advantageous for foreign language learning. Reading and analyzing literature is widely used to improve the students' level of English because it provides them with knowledge of the language itself, as well as the culture of the English speaking world. Literature is considered to develop students' comprehension skills with authentic materials from different countries and time periods while raising their personal and cultural awareness (Collie and Slater 1987). It has also been argued that the goal of literary education is to motivate and teach the students to become active readers who will keep educating themselves on literature and language (Mattila et al. 2008). One of the popular teaching methods in achieving this has been the reading circle technique. This technique gives the freedom and the responsibility to the students as they discuss literature with their peers in an open and relaxed environment. Reading circles have many positive benefits as reported in multiple studies, such as improvement in reading comprehension, student motivation, and participation (Shelton-Strong 2012).

Despite all these beneficial aspects, it is not clear how much literature is actually used in the EFL classroom during basic and secondary education. This is one of the main questions that I will discuss in this paper. However, literature courses are an important part of the English language program in many universities. On these courses, the students should learn how to analyze literature in detail by recognizing different literary devices, such as metaphors and symbolic elements. They should also learn to recognize the wider themes, cultural elements, and historical influences in the examined literature while improving their vocabulary and comprehension skills. In addition, the courses prepare students how to use literature to teach English in their future profession as teachers of EFL.

In this paper, I will examine the first-year undergraduate students of English and their perceptions and experiences with using literature in the EFL classroom. The students are from two different universities: a university from Central Finland and a university from Central Chile. The emphasis of this study is on the reading circle technique and whether the students find it beneficial for language learning. The second aim is to examine the differences and similarities between Finnish and Chilean students in the English language program and the possible reasons behind them.

2 LITERATURE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

2.1 Literature in the context of EFL

Literature has been used in language education for a long time, even though its role has sometimes been questioned. Nowadays, it is commonly considered as a positive learning strategy. Collie and Slater (1987) have identified four clear benefits for studying literature that are also beneficial for language learners and still relevant today. These positive features are the following: authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment, and personal involvement.

First of all, literary texts provide *authentic materials* originally meant for the native speakers of English. This level of authenticity is hard to achieve in the EFL textbooks because they have been designed to teach certain language elements. Textbooks do include examples of texts that are often perceived as authentic, such as stories, letters, and emails. However, these texts cannot be considered truly authentic as they are often written, or at least chosen, for the purpose of teaching EFL (Collie and Slater 1987:3). The same is argued by Falvey and Kennedy (1997:2), who state that “texts used for English language teaching and not for their original purpose can only have a spurious authenticity”. Literature written for native speakers familiarize the student with native language and texts. While textbooks mostly contain literal texts with only one level of meaning, literature offers texts with representational language. Representational language means that the text has multiple levels, such as unpredictability, figurative language, and opportunities for personal interpretation (Murphy 1997:86). Literary texts also contain linguistic diversity with various different forms of language that are not present in the textbooks, such as irony, exposition, and narration (Collie and Slater 1987:4). The authentic reading materials also challenge the students to improve their own language skills, which can be a motivating feature for the students of EFL, as reported in a study conducted by Shelton-Strong (2012). In the study, students learned to adjust their reading strategies during continuous exposure to challenging literature, and therefore, improved their skills quickly.

The second benefit listed by Collie and Slater (1987), is *cultural enrichment*, or in other words, cultural awareness. Reading and analyzing literature increases the cultural awareness of the students, which means that the students can learn about different cultures and historical themes that are presented in literature (Sell 2005:87). In the context of EFL, not all learners are able to visit English speaking countries by themselves, so literature can be used to learn about their societies (Collie and Slater 1987:4). In addition, reading literature teaches students to be open-

mindful: they learn to accept diversity and familiarize themselves with different countries and their cultures (Moecharam 2014:123). The students can also compare their own culture to the cultures discussed in books, and as a result, they can understand better their own country (Shelton-Strong 2012). Classical literature can be used to teach historical awareness and contemporary literature to introduce current issues that the students can relate to (Moecharam 2014:124). This increase in awareness is helped by the narrative structure of the books which seems to help students to handle more complex topics and ideas. The learners of EFL are more able to recognize complicated themes when they are in a form of a story, instead of discussing the issues separately without context (Sell 2005:89).

The third reported benefit is *language enrichment* (Collie and Slater 1987). As discussed in material authenticity, literature introduces various forms of language for the learners of EFL.

Reading a substantial and contextualized body of text, students gain familiarity with many features of the written language – the formation and function of sentences, the variety of possible structures, the different ways of connecting ideas – which broaden and enrich their own writing skills (Collie and Slater 1987:5).

Not all language used in literature is suitable for real-life communication, such as old English words, but literature has a sense of richness and quality of language. Literature usually contains figurative language and creative impressions, such as idioms and wordplays, which are quite challenging to find in a textbook (Daskalovska and Dimova 2012:1183). Literature can also be inspirational for the students: it can wake creativeness and give them prompts for writing and speaking (Collie and Slater 1987:5). According to Murphy (1997:88), the richness of language is also connected to student motivation. Literary texts showcase that language can be more than what we use in everyday speech: it can actually be a source of enjoyment as well as a fun way to develop their language skills. In addition, reading also develops students' vocabulary and reading comprehension (Shelton-Strong 2012). Lexical items and structures are also easier to remember because they are presented in a meaningful context.

The final benefit is *personal involvement*. This means that the reader becomes involved with the story and is drawn to it (Collie and Slater 1987:6). Language is no more the main focus of reading, and instead, the reader is emotionally connected to the characters and events of the book, which increases motivation to read. Connected to personal involvement, literature is also a personalized experience. According to, (Falvey and Kennedy 1997:2) this is what makes literature truly authentic material: literature connects with the interests of the students and their own personal lives, which makes the material more engaging. As a result, literature is seen as

motivating material that is more likely to generate a positive response with EFL students, especially when containing relevant themes for them (Moecharam 2014:124). Because of personalization, literature is also open to interpretation. This can be used as a tool to create discussion in the classroom (Sell 2005:92). These interpretations also develop students' critical thinking skills because they have to study the text from various perspectives. This teaches them to change their own viewpoints and read texts with a critical eye. This is one of the main features of the reading circle technique.

2.2 The reading circle technique

Reading circles, or literature circles, are discussion groups whose members are all reading the same literary text. According to Daniels (2002:18), there are specific ingredients that make an ideal reading circle. Firstly, students should be able to choose the book they want to read, and the group will gather to discuss the text on a regular basis, for example, once a week. Usually, students make notes while reading the book alone and express their thoughts on the chosen topic in the following discussion which should also be chosen by the students. Nevertheless, the discussion should be based on the literature and it can address different aspects of literary analysis, such as the theme, the setting, or the narrator of the book (Daniels 2002:38). Reading circles are mostly student-lead activities, where the teacher remains in the background providing guidance only when required. An ideal discussion would flow naturally and encourage students to express their own opinions and the atmosphere should be open and relaxed (Mattila *et al.* 2008:14). The final ingredient is that after the book is finished, the students should share their opinions and experiences with the rest of the class. However, the reading circle technique is only one part of literacy education and works as a possibility for the students to apply their learned skills. These skills include independent, guided, and shared reading and writing, as well as reading aloud (Noe 2004). Usually, the reading circle is a combination of independent reading and collaborative learning in small groups (Daniels 2002:38).

The reading circle technique provides multiple benefits for EFL learners. There have been multiple studies made on this topic, for example, the studies implemented by Moecharam (2014) and Shelton-Strong (2012). One of the key elements of the reading circle is that learning is a *shared experience* (Fountas and Pinnel 1996, as cited by Clower 2006:22). This means that the students have the support of their peers, which makes the reading circle technique a social activity (Noe and Johnson 1999, as cited by Campbell Hill 2007:2). The students are given an opportunity for communication in a safe environment among their peers. It is suggested by

Elhess and Egbert (2015:14) that “learners may feel more comfortable working with their peers than being constantly monitored or corrected by the teacher and may be more willing to share their viewpoints without feeling anxious about making mistakes”. It also makes literary analysis less threatening to the students, because it allows them to find solutions together. Shared experience is connected with the idea of student responsibility: when students have more ownership over their learning and they can work in a safe environment, they feel more motivated to participate and also encourage other students in their efforts. As a result, they are more capable to achieve better results (Daniels 2002:34).

Secondly, the reading circles practice students’ *oral skills*. As defined by Noe and Johnson (1999, as cited by Campbell Hill 2007:2), the reading circle is based on reader response. This means that the discussion is led by the students themselves, and it can change direction according to their opinions. This makes the reading circle an unpredictable experience which does not follow a certain scheme, and thus, cannot be repeated. However, this does not mean that the discussion is uncontrolled and without purpose. It is the students’ responsibility to control the discussion, and the teacher will provide them with the required skills to achieve this goal. The reading circle technique requires a personal response from every student, which gives them opportunities to practice their communication skills in the target language. The fact that the responses are opinion based and often related to personal experiences allow students to address issues and questions important to them and there are no “wrong” answers because every literary text has multiple interpretations. This allows the students to use their own experiences from the real world and share their opinions and emotional impacts the text made them feel. Students are able to draw connections between each other and extend their own thoughts to achieve a deep analysis of the book (Moecharam (2014:123). This makes all the students equally important for the discussion (Fountas and Pinnel 1996, as cited by Clower 2006:22). In the study conducted by Moecharam (2014:124), it was also noticed that discussions in small groups helped the students to participate and talk more freely and they felt that their thoughts were taken into consideration. Over time, these increased opportunities to communicate and practice oral skills should develop students’ oral proficiency (Elhess and Egbert 2015:14). This was also observed in the study made by Shelton-Strong (2012), in which the students reported that the reading circle technique had improved their speaking skills and they felt more confident to start conversations.

The reading circle technique also improves the other three main language skills, naturally the most prominent being *reading skills*. The technique can improve multiple skills, such as reading

speed, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Shelton-Strong 2012). According to Daniels and Steineke, reading circles “support strategies such as visualizing, connecting, questioning, inferring, and analyzing that are vital to solid comprehension and lively conversation” (2004, as cited by Elhess and Egbert 2015:14). They argue that reading circles require the students to understand and concentrate on the text in order to prepare for the discussion, which leads to improvement in reading comprehension. Furthermore, the technique also develops students’ *listening skills*. Students have to listen and respond to the ideas and questions presented by their group members to create good discussion (Noe and Johnson 1999, as cited by Elhess and Egbert 2015:14). The reading circle also has beneficial effects on *writing skills*, especially when used in group-writing exercises. The discussions also prepare students for writing literary criticism because it teaches them how to support their own arguments. The technique also teaches various skills that are needed in writing literary criticism, such as summarizing the text, asking questions, finding the main themes, and discussing character traits and motivations. With these different skills, students are able to support their own ideas and observations, which is the main requirement for writing a successful literary analysis.

Perhaps most importantly, the reading circle technique has many *motivating* elements. The goal of literary education is to teach students how to continue reading on their free-time and make them life-long readers, which would also be beneficial for EFL learners (Moecharam 2014:123). It is argued by Mattila et al. (2008:13) that this goal could perhaps be achieved if reading in a school environment resembled the way adults read books. This rarely happens in the classroom context, which might be a reason for the lack of student motivation in reading literature. Unlike in the classroom, adults are free to choose what they read from different genres, they discuss with other readers and critique the text and the writer. Adult readers are in control of their reading, and as a result, they develop their own taste in literature and can become active readers. This is related to the concept of personal involvement (Collie and Slater 1987:6) and follows the definition of reading circles given by Daniels (2002). The motivational effect of the reading circles was also noticed in the studies: the students had a positive response to the technique (Moecharam 2014), they showed interest towards certain books and authors and seemed more motivated to continue the reading habit also outside the classroom (Shelton-Strong 2012).

2.2.1 Types of reading circles

So far, I have discussed the basic elements of the reading circle technique and the reasons that make it a noteworthy technique for teaching EFL. The reading circle technique can be implemented in various ways according to the students' literary skills, as portrayed by the following models.

Reading circles with roles

Reading circles with roles provide each student with a certain task to do in the discussion (Furr 2004:6). It introduces six different roles that can be adapted for the EFL classroom. They are the following: group discussion leader, summarizer, connector, word master, passage person, and culture collector (Daniels 2002).

The discussion leader develops open-ended questions for the discussion which will direct the theme and purpose of the conversation (Daniels 2002:213). The leader opens the discussion and maintains it and keeps directing the conversation as a facilitator of the group. However, Furr (2004:6) underlines that every student still has responsibility for the activity: "the job is not to be the "boss" but just to keep the conversation moving. All students are responsible to speak and to ask follow-up questions." *The summarizer* presents a brief summary of the past happenings in the book. The summarizer is required to paraphrase the plot in their own words instead of copying it, concentrating on the most important scenes of the story. This helps all the students to remember the plot better (Daniels 2002:111). *The connector* seeks connections between the literature and the real world. The connector examines the themes, characters, actions, and feelings present in the book, and tries to connect them into the lives of the students themselves. The book can also be connected with other books or the current events in the world (Daniels 2002:115). This will activate students' personal response and connect them to the world of the book, while also uniting them as a group (Furr 2004:7). *The word master* focuses on vocabulary and phrases: they can concentrate on finding new words and phrases that they do not understand. They can also have more tasks related to vocabulary, such as finding definitions and translations and sharing them with the group. More advanced learners of EFL can focus on literary devices, like metaphors and symbolism (Furr 2004:7). *The passage person* is asked to find important or interesting passages from the book. He can also examine literary devices. The passages can be confusing, funny, or otherwise thought-provoking, and then asks the group to discuss the passages together (Furr 2004:8). The passage person can also choose passages to read aloud in the group (Daniels 2002:117). *The culture collector* examines the cultural element and historical backgrounds of the book. The collector can do research related

to these topics and share their finding with the group. In addition, the culture collector's job is to look at the story and note both differences and similarities between the culture represented in the story and their own culture" (Furr 2004:8).

In the end, reading circles with roles can become repetitive for the students. They can be used to teach the skills that make students skillful readers before moving to the basic reading circle technique (Mattila *et al.* 2008:79).

Modified reading circle

The reading circle technique can be modified to give more support for the students. This model can be used with struggling readers and is also often used with learners of EFL. These literature circles meet more often with the teacher, who takes part in the circle and can help the students to find solutions to the questions they may have. They can also do reading aloud and vocabulary work in order to develop their comprehension skills (Clower 2006:26). The circle offers more freedom for the students, but the teacher still has an important role. It can be used between the reading circle with roles and the basic, ideal reading circle technique.

Basic reading circle

In the basic reading circle, also called as book clubs (Candler n.d.), the students have a lot of freedom: they can choose their own books and decide how they are going to implement the reading circle technique. The students decide how many pages they are going to read each week, and they will write notes while reading either alone or with the group. The notes are used later to construct the discussion. There can also be a certain theme that the students want to concentrate on, such as the narrator or the symbolism in the book (Daniels 2002:2). This implementation follows closely to the ideal representation of the reading circle technique (Daniels, Mattila *et al.*). However, it requires that the students already know many of the basic skills required for this technique, such as having a good level of reading comprehension and knowledge on literary analysis. They must know how to work independently and discuss in a group. If this model can be implemented successfully, it is argued to have the best results (Candler n.d.).

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 The aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to examine how students in the English language program perceive the use of literature in the EFL classroom. The study will concentrate on their personal experiences and opinions. The emphasis is on the use of the reading circle technique: whether it is familiar to the students and whether they find it beneficial for language learning. The second aim is to examine the differences and similarities between the opinions given by the Finnish and Chilean students and what the possible reasons are behind them.

1. What kind of experiences and opinions do the first-year undergraduate students have of using literature to study EFL?
2. How do the students perceive the reading circle technique?
3. How do these experiences and opinions differ between Chilean and Finnish students and why?

By asking these questions, it is possible to investigate the current state and status of literature in the EFL education in the two countries. The answers could also help to discover how literature courses offered in the English language program in universities correspond with students' ideas and experiences.

3.2 Data and methods

This research was implemented in two parts. The first part of the data collection started in November 2017, when the questionnaire was distributed for the first-year undergraduate students in the English language program at a university located in Central Chile. The second part was executed in February 2018 for the Finnish students, also first-year undergraduates, in the English language program at a university in Central Finland.

Participants in this research were 10 first-year undergraduate students from Chile and 18 students from Finland. All the students were studying at the English language program in their own universities. The data was collected during the second semester of their first year at the university. The Chilean participants were between 18 and 19 years old. The Finnish participants were in the age range of 19 to 27 years old. Out of all 28 participants, 7 (25%) were male and 21 (75%) female.

The data was collected through an online questionnaire (see Appendix) which was distributed to the students through the university mailing lists. The questionnaire included seven open-ended questions aimed to gather information about students' previous experiences concerning

reading and literary analysis in English. It also examined their opinions and feelings related to the subject, and also questioned whether they had any previous knowledge of the reading circle technique. The questionnaire was chosen as the data collection method as it can be used with a group of participants in order to understand the general consensus. However, the data is qualitative in nature due to the open questions that asked the students to express their own opinions (Dörnyei 2007:102).

A content analysis was conducted of the answers. The answers were examined closely in attempt to categorize the answers (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This included investigating their differences and similarities and the possible reasons behind them and comparing the answers between the Finnish and Chilean students in order to find common themes among them. However, because of the small scale of this study (28 respondents), the results cannot be excessively generalized.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the results of the questionnaire will be analyzed and discussed. The discussion is divided into three parts: students' experiences, students' perception, and the reading circle technique.

4.1 Students' experiences

The results of the first part of data collection showcase that many Chilean students do not have a lot of experience with literature in English. In this sample, four (40%) of the ten participants reported to not have any experience in reading or doing literary analysis in English. The remaining group was divided on their experience: three (30%) of the students reported that their only experience was from the literature course in their current university program, while the other three (30%) reported reading books in English on their free time, outside the classroom. None of the respondents had studied literature in English during their previous education before the university (Example 1).

(1) I don't have any experience before because in my school the teachers didn't do that kind of activities and I never tried to read in English by myself. (Chilean)

The Finnish participants also had various amounts of experience concerning the use of literature in EFL. However, in contrast to Chile, four (22%) of the students responded that they had used literature in the EFL classroom during their previous studies, such as in high school. The number of students without experience was also lower, as only two (11%) reported that they had no experience at all with literature in English.

It seems that the experience that the first-year undergraduate students have in reading and analyzing literature in English is mostly based on the university courses and their personal interest in both countries. According to these respondents, it appears that literature is not commonly used as a tool to teach English during the basic education in Chile. There were mentions of using literature to learn EFL in high school among the Finnish respondents, but only by few students. However, many of both the Chilean and Finnish students wrote that they read actively in English on their free-time, but they did not have experience analyzing the books (Example 2).

(2) I've read a lot of classics (Dickens, Brontes, Austen, Shakespeare) but haven't had any experience analyzing literature. (Finnish)

For both nationalities, universities' literature courses were important parts of their literary education. It was reported by the majority of the students that they had studied literature during their university courses. For many of them, it was the first time reading in English and especially studying literary analysis, as presented by these Finnish (Examples 3 and 4) and Chilean students (Example 5).

(3) I actually have no previous experience of reading and analyzing literature in English at all before university. (Finnish)

(4) I'm very used to reading and writing in English, but analysis is something I hadn't really done before university. (Finnish)

(5) Just from this term on the English literature course. (Chilean)

Thus, it can be concluded that the literature courses provided in the English language programs are very important for the students. For many of them, it is the first time they read and analyze literature in English and also learn how to use it in the EFL classroom. Reading in English is also a matter of personal preference.

When the students were asked about different methods to study literature in English, working alone was reported as the most used strategy by the Chileans. All ten respondents had used this method to study literature, and half of them also had experience in teacher-lead activities. One of the students also mentioned story mapping as a technique. In contrast, none of these students reported using discussion activities as a technique to study literature.

Teacher-lead activities and reading alone were also the most known methods among the Finnish students, who all reported to have used at least one of these techniques to study literature.

However, the Finnish students also mentioned group work and group discussions as techniques to study literature. This was done by over 60% of the respondents.

It is possible that the difference between the two nations due to the differences in teaching strategies. In recent years, Finland has had a strong emphasis on collaborative language learning which is strongly present in the Finnish national core curriculum for general upper secondary schools (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2015). The same concentration cannot be detected from the Chilean national curriculum, even though it does mention group working skills as one of the learning objectives (Bases Curriculares 7° básico a 2° medio 2016).

4.2 Students' perception

When asked whether the students found reading literature in English challenging, there seemed to be a general agreement among both the Chilean and the Finnish students. A clear majority of the students admitted reading in English to be challenging at times, depending on the book and the vocabulary. The students also mentioned that reading in a foreign language demands more concentration than reading in their native one, which sometimes made the experience tiring. Between the two nationalities, the Chileans appeared to struggle more with basic reading comprehension. They mostly mentioned problems with vocabulary, as was written by one of the students: "I do (find it difficult), mostly because it is a different language and even when I have a good level of English I often find myself wondering and searching what an expression or a word means". The Finnish students were a bit more specific with their answers and pointed out differences between various genres of literature. They did not seem to have problems with "normal" literature but mentioned old English texts, scientific language, and poetry to be more challenging: "Depends. Older literature is harder but modern is quite easy because the language is more familiar to me". Thus, when comparing the answers, it can be assumed that the Finnish students seem to have better skills in reading comprehension compared to the Chileans, as they only reported to have problems with quite complicated literature.

This can be a result of the differences in reading experience, as discussed in the previous segment, but also with the students' level of English. First of all, Finnish students generally begin their English language learning at the age of 9 (3rd grade in Finland), when Chileans start at the age of 10 (5th grade in Chile). Secondly, the national English learning standard at the end of high school is B1 in Chile, when in Finland it is one level higher, B2 (Lukion opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2015). Finnish students also have a lot more exposure to English, as the language is widely present in media and commonly spoken by the people. In Chile,

English does not hold the same status: Spanish is dominant in all medias and speaking English is not such a common skill (British Council 2015). Therefore, it is quite likely that the Finnish students have a better level of English than the Chileans, and do not find reading as difficult.

Literary analysis was reported to be more challenging for the students than just reading in English by both the Finnish and Chilean students. Out of all the respondents, three students (10%) answered not having any difficulties with analyzing literature. As a result, three different problems could be recognized from the answers:

1) The language. Some students reported the problem to be that they had to analyze in a foreign language. This problem is related to the difficulties with reading comprehension which was discussed in the previous paragraph. The students also wrote that they had problems with expressing their thoughts in English. These problems can be detected in the following Examples.

(6) Yes, first because is not my L1. (Chilean)

(7) Yes, a little bit because, in case to do a summary, it's a difficult task to tell the story with your own words if you don't know the correct words to use. (Chilean)

(8) Usually it relates to the problem of not understanding the vocabulary used in a text mentioned above. (Finnish)

2) The analysis. Many of the students reported that they struggled to understand the true meaning of the book. They wrote that even when they understand the text completely in English, they often find the analyzing process difficult. These students seem to be familiar with literary analysis but struggle to do it on their own. They also do not perceive the analysis as a personalized experience, but as a task where there is only one correct answer, as highlighted by Examples 10 and 11.

(9) Yes, is much more complicated than reading because you have to say things that are not in an explicit way. (Chilean)

(10) The most difficult part in analyzing literature is to understand the "hidden meanings" from a text. (Finnish)

(11) Sometimes it may be hard to discern what the writer is really trying to say. (Chilean)

3) Lack of experience. Many students wrote that they lacked knowledge and experience in doing literary analysis. The students also noted analyzing being difficult regardless of the language (Examples 13 and 14).

(12) Analyzing literature, in general, is challenging, since we often don't do it. We as readers tend to enjoy the story but don't spend much time thinking about why things were written or happened a certain way. (Chilean)

(13) I find analyzing literature challenging in every language. (Finnish)

(14) I find analyzing literature kinda challenging even in Finnish so imagine doing it in English. (Finnish)

To summarize, the opinions between the two countries were very similar. Difficult language, expressing personal thoughts, and understanding the text in more than one level were perceived challenging by the students. The main reason for the difficulties seemed to be lack of experience, not just in English, but in literary analysis in general. It was evident that many students are not familiar with writing a literary analysis in any language.

4.3 The reading circle technique

Curiously enough, the participants were not familiar with the reading circle technique. Only two students (7%) out of all the respondents reported to have heard the term before and could describe it successfully, as seen in the answers by a Chilean (Example 15) and a Finnish student (Example 16).

(15) I'm guessing it's a technique where a group of people read all the same book and later give their views to the rest in the group. Not answering questions on a test or anything but saying what they think of anything in the book. (Chilean)

(16) Yes I have (everyone reads the same book and then gathers to discuss). (Finnish)

This result is interesting as many of the Finnish students answered to have used group discussions in their responds to a previous question. Therefore, it is likely that although the term “reading circle technique” is alien to the students, they might have practiced a similar technique without realizing the connection. In any case, it can be concluded that according to this sample, reading circles are not widely used in literary education in Finland nor Chile, at least not in the context of EFL.

Nonetheless, the students were all able to present good reasons for the question why discussing literature with a group could be beneficial. Firstly, the most commonly given reason was that group discussions allow the participants to get different points of view on the same book or story. This was mentioned by all the students but in different ways, as described in Examples 17-19.

(17) [It] helps because you can notice things that you didn't notice. (Chilean)

(18) More perspectives that one wouldn't have considered alone. (Finnish)

(19) Everyone interprets literature differently based on their experiences, knowledge etc. so discussing in a group would be a way to learn new perspectives. (Finnish)

It was widely recognized that different perspectives lead to richer analysis which can be more effective than studying alone (Example 20). Some students also wrote that group discussions are an opportunity to receive peer support: students can help each other with the language or how to express their thoughts, as was highlighted in Examples 21 and 22.

(20) I think group gives you different aspects and others might point out things that would have never come into your mind when working alone. Many personalities and brains are more than one. (Finnish)

(21) The people who are more adept at the language can help those who aren't. (Chilean)

(22) If you have a thought you can't quite put into words, chances are somebody else can. (Finnish)

Together these ideas cover some features of the reading circle technique and what are the benefits of studying literature in a group. The answers were similar between the Chilean and the Finnish students. It seems that students realize some of the opportunities and the possible benefits of reading circle technique even though they do not necessarily have experience in this type of activity. However, many aspects were not mentioned, such as material authenticity and the opportunity to practice speaking skills (Collie and Slater 1987).

Furthermore, the students had a positive attitude towards group work. Majority of the Chilean students reported that they would prefer group discussions over the current practices, such as reading and analyzing alone. This was done by seven out of the ten students, while the rest were unsure. This positive perception was same among the Finnish participants, where only one student was not interested in group discussions. However, many of the Finnish students reported that they would prefer a combination of techniques (Example 23).

(23) I prefer first reading alone but since I'm bad at analyzing on my own I find it helpful to hear what others think and this way see what I should look for when analyzing. However, I think independent work is also important because then you have to think by yourself. (Finnish)

To summarize, the reading circle technique is not commonly known among the students. Nonetheless, students recognize and agree that it can be beneficial and advance the literary analysis. They were openminded towards the technique and reported that they would prefer using are group discussions to study literature in the EFL classroom.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, my aim was to investigate the first-year undergraduates' experiences and opinions regarding the use of literature to study EFL. I also wanted to examine the students' perception towards the reading circle technique. The third aim was to discuss the differences between the two nationalities and their opinions, as represented by a group of Finnish and Chilean students.

My first research question examined the students' experience and perception. I discovered that the experience that the students had with reading and analyzing literature in English varied significantly. Some students reported not to have any experience in reading not analyzing when some reported being quite experienced with advanced level literature. With reading in English, the main factor seemed to be personal interest. It was pleasant to notice that many students read in English during their free-time even without any previous formal influence. As might be expected, the same was not the case with literary analysis which students had only practiced in formal context. When regarding literary analysis, universities and the literature courses they offer seem to have a major role in educating students. For many of them, these courses are the first time they analyze literature in English, as only a couple students had previous experience from basic or secondary education. Students agreed that both reading and analyzing can be difficult, however depending on the book and the language. They seemed to struggle with expressing their ideas and analyzing the meanings of the text. The main reason for the challenges appeared to be the lack of experience and knowledge, since many students explained that they did not know how to analyze literature in general, regardless of the language.

The second research question concerned the reading circle technique. When discussing different learning methods to study literature in the EFL classroom, the reading circle technique was not a familiar term for the students. Reading alone was the most used technique among them and many reported to have participated in teacher-lead activities. However, it is possible that this was a question of terminology, as some students did have experience with group work and discussions. Students agreed that group discussions offer different perspectives and often lead to a better analysis. There is also an opportunity for brainstorming and peer support. The students had a positive perception of group discussions and the majority would have preferred them over other techniques. Combination of techniques was also a popular answer among the students.

The third and final research question was to consider the differences between the Finnish and the Chilean students. In most parts, their opinions followed the same lines, as it was with the questions regarding the reading circle technique. However, some differences can be detected in their experiences. Finnish students reported to have more experience with reading and analyzing literature in English compared to the Chileans. The Finnish read more in English on their free-time and some had formal experience in literary analysis from secondary education, while the Chileans had none. In addition, the Chilean students seemed to have more difficulties with basic reading comprehension, when the Finnish struggled with the more advanced language. The final difference concerned the teaching methods: the Chilean students did not report having experience in group activities when studying literature in English. These characteristics can possibly be explained by differences in curriculums and also by the level and status of English in both countries.

Based on this study, the use of literature in the EFL context does not have a very strong presence during the basic and secondary education. Instead, it is evident that the English literature courses in universities have an important, but also a challenging role in this matter. As many students lack experience, there might be a need to concentrate more on the basics before starting a deep analyzing process, especially with advanced literature. However, the findings of this study only represent a small number of students, and thus, they cannot be generalized. There is also an unbalance between the two countries as there were more participants from Finland than from Chile. Further study in a larger scale with quantitative methods would give a better picture of the current state of literature in EFL. The reading circle technique could also be examined further, for example with a case study or an action research project. This could aid the universities to design their own literature courses to serve students' needs and aid with the challenging aspects of literary analysis. By giving students and the future teachers of English a strong basis in literary education, they are more likely to use it also in their own teaching. As a result, literature will hopefully remain in the EFL classroom for many decades to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix: Questions of the reading circle questionnaire

Personal information:

Gender: Male Female Other

Age:

Questions:

1. What previous experience do you have of reading and analyzing literature in English?
2. What kind of techniques have you used to study literature in English (teacher-lead activities, group work, working alone)?
3. Do you find reading literature in English challenging? Why?
4. Do you find analyzing literature in English challenging? Why?
5. Have you ever heard about *the reading circle technique* to improve literary analysis?
6. What could be the benefits of discussing literature with a group?
7. Would you prefer group discussions over other techniques, such as reading alone?