

# The Benefits and Challenges of Culturally Responsive EFL Critical Literature Circles

**Through critical literature circles, learners view reading as a source of knowledge and a catalyst for articulating and challenging each other's views.**

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Several years ago, I received my first fellowship to teach EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in Tajikistan, a small but beautiful mountainous nation in Central Asia. While working in Dushanbe, the culturally and linguistically diverse capital, I learned of the challenges students and teachers face in relation to the six-year civil war and the economic difficulty that followed it.

Eager, talented students had a passion for learning despite the limitations in regional resources and generally poor infrastructure (Harris, 2006). In this context, education is tied to rich literary and cultural traditions from Persian/Tajik and Russian (as a former member of the Soviet Union).

During my first year, my students, most of whom were Muslim, would regularly request fiction and nonfiction texts about other Islamic communities or neighboring nations with related cultures (Fredricks, 2009). While teaching reading and working in the English library, I realized that though the students appreciated Russian, American, and British literature, they requested more texts about Iran and Afghanistan, nations historically and linguistically linked to Tajikistan.

In addition, these adult students were eager to compare the contexts of those texts with their own social and political context. I then considered how EFL students in such a diverse setting might benefit from a more critical, culturally relevant approach.

I reflected on how there has been an increased interest in culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to teach diverse populations of students more effectively through a deeper exploration of social and political concerns (Canagarajah, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994). As a result, in the subsequent years, I initiated a new variety of literature circles: critical literature circles (CLCs), which drew from critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Literature circles, popularized by Harvey Daniels (2002), are “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (p. 2). Members share information about what they have read with each other and, in some cases, with the wider community (Daniels, 2002).

In these circles, readers develop personal responses to literature, can express their views on texts in relation to their own life experiences and philosophies, and have “an opportunity for enjoyable L2 reading experiences” (Kim, 2004, p. 145). In addition, literature circles can prompt an increase in students’ motivation to read (McElvain, 2010) and a stronger degree of inferential thinking (Jewell & Pratt, 1999).

Although literature circles are a highly interactive way of reading and sharing texts, there is not an inherently critical or culturally relevant component. Based on my students’ preferences, I offered the CLCs as a format for relating texts to members’ own historical, cultural, and social issues and sharing opinions on these topics in an educational setting.

With CLCs, the facilitator invites members to analyze depictions of events, communities, characters, and themes and to relate them to pertinent issues in their lives. Mainly because of the scarcity of materials, the primary form of language instruction in Tajikistan was a teacher-centered grammar translation approach, often using Soviet-themed textbooks. Thus, the CLCs presented a fairly new experience for my students.

From this critical perspective, I saw inquiry as central (Freire, 1970) and viewed the classroom as connected to the larger community (Canagarajah, 2002). I strove to nurture a passion for reading, an important aspect of EFL-extensive reading (Sachs, 2001), and offered a negotiable curriculum in which “everyday events occurring in the lives of students are legitimate objects of academic study” (Behrman, 2006, p. 495).

I designed the CLCs in light of my belief that classroom discourse must be connected to students’ interests and that students must have a clear purpose of their own for speaking or becoming literate in a language (Shor, 1999). Similarly, I integrated culturally responsive aspects that deal with controversy by “studying a wide range of ethnic individuals and groups; contextualizing issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender; and including multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives” (Gay, 2002, p. 108).

As a result, the CLCs reflected students’ interest in culturally relevant texts as well as books and resources from other countries and cultures (see Fredricks, 2009, for the selection criteria).

## Methodology

Because the circles were a radical departure from their usual curricula, I explored what aspects might challenge as well as benefit students. I wondered what participants, if given choices, would find relevant and how relevant texts and discussion themes might affect their reading.

As a result, this study aimed to investigate the potential of a critical, culturally responsive framework. I sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the benefits and challenges of using critical literature circles in a diverse EFL setting?
- How do EFL learners respond to the potentially culturally relevant aspects of the CLCs?
- How are learners’ reading attitudes and reading habits affected by the CLCs?

Unlike typical literature circles, the CLCs (also referred to as reading clubs) met for an academic year and were offered to any intermediate and advanced EFL learners in the Dushanbe community.

Thirty-three adult learners, in five groups of six to seven, met at one of two locations, based on their schedules. The groups voted on which texts to read and read multiple copies of the same text. Each group read numerous texts and, because of the duration of the project, members became well acquainted.

In addition, my local partner, Valentina Ivanovna Sobko, and I were able to learn a great deal about the members and their goals, reading preferences, and interests. The library of texts included potentially culturally relevant texts, based on selection criteria from an earlier study, and less culturally similar texts (Fredricks, 2009; see Table).

Mrs. Sobko and I (I am referred to as RES: researcher) collected data through two sets of transcribed participant interviews (initial one-on-one interviews [I1] and final focus group interviews [FG]), twenty CLC transcriptions (CT), two sets of written participant reflections (R1, R2), and a researcher journal (RJ).

Toward the end of the year, I analyzed transcribed member checking (MC) and peer debriefing sessions.

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**Table Participants and Texts Discussed**

Group	Texts	Members	Sexes and ethnicities
One	<i>Persepolis</i> (Satrapi, 2003) (CR)	Niso	F, Tajik
		Suhrob	M, Tajik
Two	<i>The Kite Runner</i> (Hosseini, 2003) (CR)	Darya	F, Russian
	<i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000)	Aksana	F, Ukrainian
Three	<i>The Pursuit of Happyness</i> (Gardner, 2006)	Tahmina	F, Tajik
	<i>Soviet Women Discuss Work, Marriage, and the Family</i> (Gray, 1996) (CR)	Shabnam	F, Tajik
		Masoud	M, Uzbek & Tajik
		Firuz	M, Tajik
		Maryam	F, Tajik
Four	<i>Hatchet</i> (Paulsen, 1996)	Laylo	F, Tajik
	<i>Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind</i> (Staples, 2003) (CR)	Rukhsor	F, Tajik
	<i>I, Juan de Pareja</i> (De Trevino, 1965)	Nabi	M, Tajik
		Dilya	F, Tajik
		Daler	M, Tajik
Five	<i>A Thousand Splendid Suns</i> (Hosseini, 2007) (CR)	Shirin	F, Tajik
	<i>Hatchet</i> (Paulsen, 1996)	Gulya	F, Tajik
		Saida	F, Tajik
		Zaynab	F, Tajik
		Bahor	F, Uzbek
	Natalya	F, Ukrainian	

Note. CR = Culturally Relevant.

Member checking entailed discussing findings with participants, while peer debriefing involved discussing findings with teachers not involved in the research. The data were coded and analyzed continuously using the constant comparative method of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the following section, I will discuss four of the major themes that emerged.

## Results

### ***Exploring Life Lessons: Reading as a Source of Knowledge about Life and the World***

Members frequently discussed learning “life lessons” from texts. Participants often equated reading with opportunities to learn about a wide range of topics

including nature, history, and cultures, and to see how problems are faced and solved around the world.

In particular, group four, who read *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1996), *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (Staples, 2003), and *I, Juan de Pareja* (De Trivino, 1965), and group three, who read *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gardner, 2006), found that their texts and the accompanying discussions posed ways to deal with everyday dilemmas. Tahmina (all names are pseudonyms) expressed how she learned from new characters and cultures:

By reading we could meet with another people. Which has a life just like ours. And perhaps we will learn something new from his life. From the life of this character which we are reading. About him or her. And about different cultures from different countries. How people believe that. And how do

they work there. How do they improve and satisfy themselves. Survive. Yeah. And how's their world vision. (FG)

Group one also discussed this issue. They regularly debated political and social issues (especially about Tajikistan), and explained how they learned lessons from texts that focused on those topics. Regarding *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), Suhrob commented on how personal connections allowed him to “be more resilient.” When reading and discussing the revolution and political changes in Iran, Suhrob felt that he gained experience he could apply to his own life:

And from a psychological point of view. As we are reading *Persepolis* now. It helped me to be more resilient. To be more experienced. It's like we are facing. I feel that I am facing some difficulties in my own life. Such events, I think that they further can help me to overcome every difficulties I face. (FG)

Learning life lessons and acquiring other new types of knowledge emerged as topics in all of the groups, and this was often related to the participants' connections to and analyses of characters. With *The Pursuit of Happyness*, members aimed to learn about Chris Gardner, a person who had overcome incredible challenges. They were curious to discover how someone with so many obstacles could become so successful, not solely with monetary success but also with success as a father. Similarly, members reported discovering new information about nature and history when reading *Hatchet* and *I, Juan de Pareja*.

When I inquired about why group three voted for *The Pursuit of Happyness*, members unanimously mentioned that this nonfiction text was “real” or “true” and contained lessons or advice about life challenges. Shabnam mentioned that “these texts are given from real life—there are many cultures and when you share with our group you do understand more” (R1).

According to Shabnam, the texts contained genuine cultural insights and the group discussions helped them unravel and interpret what they discovered. Masoud noted, “Well, I feel good ‘cause this story nonfiction and true story. I think this book as a everyday life story” and added that “Doing what

is right is not always easy but it always right (Keep going Chris)” (R1).

The participants felt that the text offered advice on how to deal with multiple types of adversity. This was linked to the idea that the book is realistic and provides specific examples of how someone dealt with a dysfunctional family, discrimination, and economic difficulties. In the following transcript excerpt, members explained how learning about Chris's perseverance could help them in their own lives:

- RES: Why did you choose this book?  
Shabnam: Because it came from true life. True life. True story. And, how can I say? The, the book for. Not example. But in order to describe. I don't know in English. La primera.  
Maryam: Do you want to say this story is an example for life?  
Shabnam: Yes, I think that people can learn many things from this book. For example, you can compare your situation with his life. Maybe.  
Laylo: It can be example for you.  
RES: For your life? You mean you can learn something from it.  
Shabnam: For example, when I heard his mother said that. Go forward. Go forward. And every time I realized this was go forward. And I remember some of my situation.  
Firuz: In my opinion. If you want to have a good life. Firstly you have to, how to say. You have to pass.  
Shabnam: Difficulties.  
RES: Challenges.  
Firuz: Yes, face with challenges. In order to be qualified.  
RES: OK. That's an interesting philosophy.  
Shabnam: Like ours. (CT)

Shabnam was eager to apply Chris's mother's advice to her current situation. At this time, Shabnam was struggling with an important decision about marriage. In fact, several of the group members were

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dealing with lifestyle changes (moving, getting married, getting pregnant, etc.) during the year and, while debating and connecting to texts, they regularly shared their thoughts on these personal situations. Their desire to share important events in their lives may have been intertwined with their motivation to read “real” texts that could initiate these topics.

Group four also discussed how the texts offered them more than linguistic input, referring to the other types of learning such as new cultural insight and knowledge about nature. In their initial reflections, the members referred to the short stories we had read and the novel *Hatchet*.

For instance, Dilya reported that “it is really interesting books which acquaint us with the world of adventures and traditional of people from other countries” (R1). When I asked what he liked best about the texts, Daler similarly wrote, “Most of stories are very interesting from my point of view because I could gain a lot of experience from this stories and it will help me how to live” (R1).

For these members, the texts exposed them to skills and different ways of living from around the world. In the focus groups, they continued to mention gaining new knowledge and even changing their views about cultures. In this segment, Rukhsor shared her changing impressions of the nomadic people in Pakistan:

Shirin: Even you can read the books you, not only learn the words. Also, you find something new. As Nabi said. You can find some new people, history or from culture. And many things.

Rukhsor: I changed my opinion that we can learn not only to increase our vocabulary but also to change. As it happened to me. I changed my opinion about the culture of the families which live in *Shabanu*. Where she lived, in Pakistan. I thought that their lives were so boring. That they’re always sitting in one place and not having electricity.

Nabi: Like here in Tajikistan. [laughs]

Rukhsor: Like here in Tajikistan. I thought that the whole day they were sitting and eating at home. But they were also. They could run. They didn’t spare their time with their [unintelligible] things. But, I really liked the story *Shabanu*. It changed my opinion, my mind about them. (FG)

Rukhsor had previously believed that the life of the nomadic people in the story was “boring.” As she read further, she found that their daily lives were interesting. Later in the interview, Rukhsor elaborated on why this mattered:

Rukhsor: People. It depends on them and I think that there is something that is not familiar. But like our life and it can change our life also. It can change our opinion about other people. About our parents. Because in general. The same. They touch the same problems which consists with our life. (FG)

Rukhsor believed that the characters’ situations could be related to her own experiences. She also explained that seeing how characters deal with problems could be beneficial for her in that she may apply those solutions to her dilemmas. In addition to gaining linguistic exposure when reading and talking about texts, Rukhsor and others gained knowledge about living situations in vastly different contexts.

### ***Becoming More Confident Readers***

In each group, participants experienced becoming more confident readers. In their final written reflections, many members reported enjoying reading texts they had chosen rather than those that they were “forced” to read for courses. For instance, Rukhsor noted how she became a reader of more diverse texts:

Rukhsor: First of all I want to say that my mind has changed about English books, as before we had to read English books and it wasn’t so interesting as now and also these books which we are reading

they are so different and you are not made to read them. My reading habits have changed great, by reading more different books. (R2)

Group one also mentioned enjoying the freedom to select texts based on their interests, which made reading more stimulating for them. Niso had previously read only when it was assigned but later read more for pleasure in both English and Russian:

Niso: Certainly, before I was reading just because I had to do it. I read mostly books which I needed for the university classes but now I spend my spare time in reading short (not long stories—English, Russian). I read also some scientific articles and psychological as well. (R2)

Group four members similarly found reading to be easier and more interesting. Shirin and Nabi discussed how linguistic support from the group scaffolded their acquisition of vocabulary and new concepts:

Shirin: Saying our opinion or saying something about the story. Even if I forget the words. Somebody will remind me. And I can say so I repeat it and I hope I couldn't forget anymore.

Nabi: OK. To speak about. To talk about my opinions among other people. It was kind of scary for me. I couldn't talk in groups or freely. Visiting this reading club. More and more reading and discussion helped me to develop my speech in the group. And I can see nowadays. I see that I can really talk. I can share my opinions and I can know even more. And, what I liked in this reading club. At the same time I learned about the history. For example. When we learned about Juan de Pareja. There was written about the history of Spain. Italy. And that gave me the opportunity to learn about their cultures as well. (FG)

Much like Nabi, Daler had many new experiences in the circle. In this excerpt, Daler shared how *I, Juan de Pareja* was the first English book he had completed. He explained that his motivation to do so was connected with the “real” aspects of the story, including details about the historical context:

Daler: About me. Participating in this club. I'll tell you the truth. *I, Juan de Pareja* was the first book. Was the first English book. And I finished it. [group laughs] Because I really liked it. Because it really happened and it's connected with history. And so I gained a lot of experience of speech in group in English. I become more confident in speaking English. And so I understood a lot of opinions. A lot of minds of our Tajik people about reading. About everything. (FG)

Daler's increased tendency to read was related to the group dynamic and the practice of frequently reflecting on texts. Daler also obtained a deeper understanding of his peers' views, which may have allowed him and others to see the text from several perspectives.

### ***Being Emotionally or Psychologically Challenged by a Text***

Though participants reported increased confidence and interest in reading, some members experienced psychological discomfort with topics raised in their selected books. In groups two (reading *The Kite Runner* [Hosseini, 2003]), three (*The Pursuit of Happyness*), and five (*A Thousand Splendid Suns* [Hosseini, 2007]), participants occasionally felt emotionally or psychologically challenged by a text.

In each case, these experiences caused us to discuss whether participants wanted to change their novels. Ultimately, the groups all insisted on continuing via a majority rule decision. However, a couple of participants were quite vocal about their negative opinions.

Two participants wrote about these concerns in their initial reflections. When asked what he liked least about the text, Masoud noted, “Some words

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which make me not comfortable when we read in the class” (R1). Masoud was referring to cursing and derogatory terms used in *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

When asked about connections to *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Saida wrote, “Actually I don’t like reading a book which theme and subject relates to the war in any language. Because I become sad and a pessimist. I started remember our life during the war” (R1).

Interestingly, Saida and Masoud both gave their texts favorable reviews after completing them. This was usually, though not always, the case.

Most group-five members reported liking *A Thousand Splendid Suns* but thought parts of the novel were emotionally challenging. As Saida mentioned, the sections describing the war reminded members of their own experiences. In addition, the members sympathized with Mariam, the main character, a victim of graphically depicted psychological abuse by her mother and physical abuse by her husband, Rashid.

Gulya regularly remarked that, “It was terrible when Mariam. She started to remind about her mom. When she was telling her that she’s harami {an illegitimate child}” (CT). When I asked if they preferred to read a different text, the group consistently stated that they wanted to complete the novel, anxious to see how the story ended. They also concurred with Zaynab who suggested, “Next time we’ll choose something more funnier” (CT).

Yet Zaynab never fully agreed with the rest of the group about enjoying the novel. On some days, she would reiterate her impressions of the text multiple times:

Zaynab: And it’s really difficult to read it. It really relates to our life. I’ve read to the 17th chapter. But I didn’t wish to take this book anymore because I was depressed for two days. It’s very difficult for me. (CT)

Bahor and the others concurred that the abuse of the female main character was what bothered them most:

Bahor: Especially the respect to women. The woman is created not for man’s. Not foot. Not head. I mean that. For example. He’s, for example Rashid is you know like thinking that he’s king. (CT)

Bahor added, “Many people are clever but still don’t respect their wives. And some people are not educated. But they still know that they have to respect. It’s a complicated thing” (CT).

Though the characters are fictional, the dilemmas and struggles they face seemed very real. In this section, Bahor also shared her reaction to Rashid. Bahor repeatedly mentioned her sentiments about his violent nature as Rashid caused understandably negative reactions from every member.

Bahor and Zaynab also explained they believe that tradition, not religion, perpetuates the lack of respect for women. In many instances, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* prompted these discussions of difficult topics; yet, group five continued to read it, as they were eager to explore the outcome of the story.

Members were generally willing to undergo challenges to complete a text or because they found the text to be appealing. This is significant because participants reported being psychologically or emotionally challenged with the two most popular books: *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *The Kite Runner*. I later learned that while members may not need their entire reading experience to be positive, negative experiences affect their subsequent text selections.

### **Discussing Common Beliefs**

In steering the circles away from a teacher-as-authority model, or banking method, students engaged in rich discussions (Freire, 1970). On some occasions, discussions revealed popular beliefs and possible prejudices, particularly when comparing cultures.

In each group, members made comparisons to Russian lifestyles and people and considered themselves knowledgeable about Russian culture. This is likely because of historical and cultural influences stemming from a long-term relationship between Tajikistan and Russia. In group three, these comparisons typically regarded women’s issues.

Many points were positive associations and some were likely accurate depictions. Members often

prefaced comments with “some,” to indicate that not all Russians live in exactly the same way.

When discussing *Soviet Women Discuss Work, Marriage, and the Family* (Gray, 1996), a story about Russian female graduate students and professors during the Soviet Union, Shabnam explained why some Russians prefer to live together before or possibly instead of getting married:

Shabnam: Some Russians, they do not get married because they are not sure of their feelings. That’s why they live together temporary. About five six years. Then when they become sure they get married. And maybe they have children. One or two. But it doesn’t matter. They are happy. (CT)

On this day, Shabnam frequently held the floor while others asked questions or briefly mentioned identifying with characters with remarks like, “Yeah, and there is Masha. Just like my life” (Tahmina, CT).

Though Shabnam spoke more than the others, they nodded, agreed, and laughed in response to her comments. As the spokesperson on this day, Shabnam began with a positive assessment of the characters and Russians of today, gradually revealing a mixed review of their relationships:

Shabnam: And Natasha said, OK, the marriage will end. It is so easy for them. But you know I think that on one side. It is good when you live with a person whom you like for example. Without any marriage. Without any responsibility. (CT)

Shabnam’s assessment was interesting because she did not mention the more traditional characters in the story. Though most of the Russian women depicted agree that having children is more of a priority than having a spouse, a range of views is presented. As the group remained in agreement, Shabnam continued and became more critical in her views:

Shabnam: You know the Russian people, they are very difficult. [group laughs] Most of

Russian men. After years they become drunkards. Alcohol addicted.

RES: Oh, alcoholics?

Shabnam: And they are not, for example. How can I say. Our Tajik people. They are. Our men. You see I want to be. I mean. How can I say? OK. For example. Before marriage, I want to know this person about minimum 6 months or one year or two years.

RES: To know them more?

Shabnam: Yes, because it’s not joke. OK. I don’t mind. And then the end. Of course I want. That is why when you live together. They know each other. Learn from each other. They need to understand each other. And THEN get married and bring a child. Because the children suffer about adults. Because of adults. When they depart, these children. They go to this house. (CT)

At no point in this discussion did the other members disagree with Shabnam. Unfortunately, our Russian member was absent on this day, and I mentioned that it would have been beneficial to ask her opinion of the story and their comments.

Shabnam believed that most Russian women have the social options of seeking higher education and a career and are not forced into marriage by familial pressure. She viewed this as a benefit because, in her opinion, divorce is unlikely if the couple knows each other well prior to marriage.

It also seems that these members felt that most Russian men are prone to alcoholism, a belief mentioned in several sessions and among different groups. Though Shabnam’s thoughts on the options available to Russian women were positive, they may not be entirely accurate, especially for women in rural areas.

In addition, it is not accurate to say that all Russian men are likely to become alcoholics. These comments may represent common beliefs about Russian people, framed both positively (women’s freedom) and negatively (alcoholism and a perceived lack of commitment to family).



Group five also discussed beliefs when comparing cultures. Members seemed to understand the social situation for girls like Mariam in Afghanistan. At the same time, they criticized certain cultural or social points. When detailing parallels in Tajikistan, some members seemed to identify positively with Afghans, while others did not.

These beliefs surfaced more in our earliest sessions. On one occasion, Saida stated that, according to the novel, Afghan people did not value the lives of girls and women. When I pressed her to clarify if she believed this situation occurred in some cases or in general, she added that she believed it was widespread and occurs in Tajikistan as well:

- Saida: You know, the chapters which I read. I understood that women's life doesn't have a value in Afghanistan. Because if you read. If a woman give a birth to boy, it's OK. It's a good news. But if a woman give birth to a girl. Most men doesn't. Doesn't like or doesn't pay attention to this. And the next reason—
- RES: Do you think it's common or true for most people? That they're happier if they have a boy than if they have a girl?
- Saida: It's common. Yes. Even in our country it's common. Yes. And the next reason. I think most young people was killed in the war. (CT)

According to Saida, the preference for male children was common in both countries, partly because many young people, mainly men, were killed during the war.

Comparing common beliefs sometimes created tension within the groups. This was noticeable, for example, if a Russian member was present during a negative critique of Russian values. Yet, within each group there was a sense of unity, a bond strong enough to maintain their friendships throughout and, for several, beyond the circles.

In addition, during the discussions I became more aware of the values of different groups in Tajikistan. Through participating in critical literacy, like students, the facilitator gains an understanding of learners' conditions and perceptions (Shor, 1999). As a cultural outsider, these discussions helped me better

comprehend local challenges and the importance of a curriculum that incorporates diverse views.

## Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the flexibility of the CLCs revealed members' dynamic reading preferences and propensity for discussing opinions on issues such as relationships, social norms, traditions, and history. For instance, Rukhsor viewed the nomads depicted in *Shabanu* as more intriguing than she had previously thought and found similarities between her family and characters in the novel.

Participants identified with Gardner's struggles in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and related them to their group philosophy that struggling makes one more "qualified" for success. This process of relating to characters, in both *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Shabanu*, allowed participants to reflect deeply on their own society as well as other societies.

At the end of the year, members mentioned enjoying the diversity of choices and the opportunity to shift from one text type to another. Some, including the culturally relevant texts, were emotionally challenging, yet relatable and engaging.

The experiences of group two, with *The Kite Runner*, and group five, with *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, affected their successive choices. They later selected *Holes* (Sachar, 2000) and *Hatchet* to read something "lighter" but found the prior texts to be more thought provoking.

For instance, Aksana described her impression of *Holes* as less "discussion-worthy" than *The Kite Runner*. During member checking she, like other members, explained that *Holes* was "just for fun," adding, "We can't talk a lot about it. You can just express your opinion whether you like it or not. But not really you know have deep conversations or deep debate on topics like this" (MC). Darya concurred, stating, "people were more touched by this story [*The Kite Runner*] because there were so connections to them" (MC).

When I asked why group five had chosen to continue *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, even after their challenges, Natlaya and Zaynab explained that they had hoped for a happy ending. Despite the "terrible" ending, Natalya explained, "All of us were happy

about finishing this book and about the reading,” and added that “We have our own experience and maybe the experience of others people. And we like to discuss these kinds of things just to know the opinions and ideas of others” (MC). For some, discussing culturally and personally relevant texts was more valuable than maintaining a certain level of comfort.

While the students were not previously used to critical discussion that involved culturally relevant materials, they were enthusiastic about participating. Suhrob explained that many English instructors use British or American literature rather than Tajik literature or texts related to Tajik culture. He mentioned that

It was like how to say a great opportunity for us that you provide us with multiple choice. Like about Afghan culture. About like Iranian culture. You know. In our country it's very hard like to get some kind of book. And that's why I think the first step was made by you. You provide us with a great deal of books. Like with a lot of books and we make our choice. Because a lot of people in our country they know more about Western cultures. Not about their own cultures. (MC)

Like numerous EFL settings, these students had been primarily exposed to culturally foreign literature. Many enjoyed those texts but were curious to read books about cultures from their region of the world. Given this result, practitioners should consider the lack of representation of students' cultures or history in texts and how this might influence their learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The opportunity to self-select and discuss readings inspired my students to read more and, in turn, to become more confident, critical readers. Using CLCs, however, can pose certain challenges.

In addition to accessing materials (in this case, obtained through grants) that represent multiple perspectives, there is the issue of how (or perhaps whether) to promote critical literacy in a somewhat transitional, “Soviet-style” educational setting. Many public schools are still fairly constrained in what they can do to supplement the existing curricula.

As an initial step, practitioners in other settings could offer and research the effects of voluntary, community-based CLCs that include texts from various cultures, at least some of which are related to students' cultures. This could be done in collaboration with other teachers and students.

## Take Action!

When organizing and facilitating CLCs, consider these suggestions:

1. Select an initial body of texts that reflects a range of factors that could make literature relatable, including gender, social class, religion, regional proximity, ethnic diversity, and linguistic similarities (Fredricks, 2009). Whenever possible, the specific criteria should be informed by local students' and teachers' input.
2. Consider providing structure through some contextualized language-learning activities in the early stages within grammar translation based EFL settings. You can also offer structure through modeling and assigning roles (discussion director, summarizer, word wizard, etc.; see Daniels, 2002) to gradually familiarize members with the more student-centered approach.
3. Consider sharing critical reflections on your own culture(s) and context to model the critiquing process. Think about and discuss why your perspectives may have changed over time regarding social, political, and cultural shifts in your society. In addition, you may share how issues like racism, sexism, and social class divisions have changed throughout history and how these have been depicted in literature.
4. Discuss your students' cultures, histories, and languages. Invite students to offer and debate their explanations for each other and for you as a learner, using literature related to students' backgrounds. This can occur during regular CLC conversations and through members finding supplemental readings. Supplements, including newspaper and encyclopedia articles, build schema for the contexts of the chosen literature.
5. Discuss authors' representations of cultures and communities. Invite debate on why the representations may be authentic or biased. For example, members might discuss whether authors can write about a culture other than their own or why an author may have chosen to write a particular book (Short & Fox, 2004).

Some of my local peers, for instance, were equally interested in instruction that actively integrated local issues in the curriculum. Like them, I strove to situate academic knowledge within students' lived experiences and frames of reference to try to make learning easier and more meaningful (Gay, 2002).

The resulting critical framework allowed CLC members to use English in meaningful ways, avoiding the “teacher-controlled, nondialogic, ‘banking’ style of learning” (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 623). Their experiences illustrated that through CLCs, EFL learners can use English for their own purposes, delving into topics that concern their social worlds.

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