

ACADEMIC READING CIRCLES: THE WHY AND THE HOW

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how incorporating a structured reading scheme, as proposed by Tyson Seburn in *Academic Reading Circles*, within a standard university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course at C1 or C2 (here at the Jagiellonian Language Centre, Jagiellonian University) can promote the development of language skills, academic literacies, learner autonomy as well as the advancement of interaction and social skills.

I have taught English as a foreign language at tertiary level for about fifteen years. Most of my groups have been at C1 or C2. When I first started teaching university students at such high levels, I soon came to the conclusion that using a regular, commercially available, English coursebook did not reflect students' needs and expectations nor did it make me happy as a teacher. In general, the level of English amongst university students' has been steadily rising over time and thus authentic materials, carefully selected and curated, have become the norm for me and my groups. More often than not, it has been a text, often one that aligns with my students' interests and/or their field of study, that became the basis for each lesson. From here, the notion of reading circles that has somehow appeared on my radar took a stronger hold when I read *Academic Reading Circles* by Tyson Seburn. The idea looked simple and very effective and I decided to implement it straightaway.

So far, I have done Academic Reading Circles, or ARCs as I am going to refer to them, with four different C2 groups at the Institute of Middle and Far East and one C1 group at the Institute of International Relations. I have collected feedback from all participants in the form of end-of project anonymous self-reflection questionnaires and I would like to share some insights from the feedback in this article, too.

What are Academic Reading Circles?

The Academic Reading Circles scheme is an intensive reading approach which improves learner understanding of academic texts through collaboration. In the words of ARCs inventor, Tyson Seburn, the method comes down to ‘a group of readers circled around a common text used for an academic purpose’ (Seburn, 2015). There are three components of an ARC: the common text, the students with their individual roles and the group discussions in class. For each role, which I will elaborate on later, each student is required to prepare a handout. Originally designed for students of English for Academic Purposes, ARCs focus on a deep understanding of the ideas within the academic text, something that will stand them in good stead later on in their university education.

What ARCs develop

Language skills

Reading is one of the crucial language skills for EFL university students. In the context of tertiary education, it becomes extremely important for students to be able to cope with longer, formal, academic texts. They often find reading such texts challenging and tedious and they do need help. I have found that one effective way of tackling this issue is enriching a regular general English university course with a month-long scheme of weekly Academic Reading Circles (ARCs). The project manages to engage students and, more importantly, lends variety to the development of the essential skill of reading. It provides students with ample opportunity for regular practise of a number of reading strategies starting from previewing, contextualising and activating background knowledge; following through with predicting, skimming and scanning; and finishing with writing main-idea summaries and formulating a critical evaluation of the text.

Every time an ARC takes place, each student has to prepare a handout. And each time, this will be a different kind of handout depending on what role the student takes. This arrangement gives students a chance to practise many different writing skills. For example, in the role of a Leader they will create and draft summaries together with concept or discussion questions. As Visualisers they will write comments to visual data such as any charts or graphs they can find connected with the text. If they happen to be Contextualisers, they will have to summarise in their own words any other findings. And finally as Language Masters, they will create grammar and/or vocabulary exercises based on the language employed in the text.

Academic skills

Now I shall list some academic skills that students develop through their participation in ARCs:

- engaging with academic texts on the topic connected with their field of study,
- critical thinking skills (e.g. selecting important information in the text; distinguishing between facts and opinions; asking questions, engaging in academic discussions),
- reading from different perspectives and assuming different roles,
- presentation skills,
- research skills,
- self-reflection,
- time management skills e.g., coping with procrastination.

Social skills

Generation Z students may find themselves a little on the back foot when it comes to interacting with other people. However, in the course of ARCs they are required to present to and engage in discussions with randomly selected students to whom they might not necessarily have a chance to talk otherwise. This aspect of ARCs comes out strongly in the end-of-project feedback questionnaire. It is something that students find stressful at first but seem to appreciate a lot by the end of the four-week ARC scheme.

Learner autonomy

And finally, fostering learner autonomy is another benefit. A great advantage is that it is the students who decide on what to read. They themselves search for suitable academic texts which are then collected for everyone to see and next they try to make a joint decision on which texts they are going to read over the next four weeks. While preparing a handout, students are given general tips but at the end of the day it is they who decide what discussion questions to include, which contextual reference is valid, or which particular graph enriches the understanding of a given concept as described in the text. At the end of each session, students also engage in self-reflection. This activity, which ‘provides the learner with a feedback immediately available to determine language proficiency and to reflect on learning strategies’ (Gholami, 2016: 46), is an excellent learner autonomy development tool.

The set up

Texts

Everything begins with the text. Each ARC focuses on the text linked to our students' field of study. How to choose what to read? I usually ask each student to find a suitable academic article. The text needn't be very long, certainly no longer than ten pages, but it must be connected with their major. We usually end up with around ten to twelve different texts to choose from. Students usually upload them onto our common online space – in my case it is the Files section on MS Teams. We start from here, we look at the texts and together come to an agreement as to which four we are going to read over the next four weeks. We all read the same text for each ARC.

Making a joint decision on what we are going to read may pose problems. After all, we all have our own preferences and specific interests. What works? In my experience, we can try:

- emphasising that we are reading authentic academic texts relevant to their degrees,
- using texts that students are reading for other classes, if this is the case,
- encouraging negotiations among students through group and whole class discussions.

Roles

Let me now explain the students' roles. At the start, I usually present my students with the infographic (see next page), which allows them to comprehend the idea of the project at a glance.

The infographic reflects my own experience and choice of roles. All the crucial information is included here. As I talk students through the whole premise of the ARCs and their elements as well as students' roles, time limits and consecutive steps of the project, they begin to have a general idea of what is expected from them. Later on, I give them more detailed instructions connected with the hand-outs they will be required to prepare.

Students usually appreciate this short visual intro into the whole idea of ARCs.

At this point, students will probably have a lot of questions so it is worthwhile going through each role description in turn. Naturally, I have adapted the role descriptions from Tyson Seburn's book. I have simplified them somewhat and also divided each into main task, preparation and group work sections.

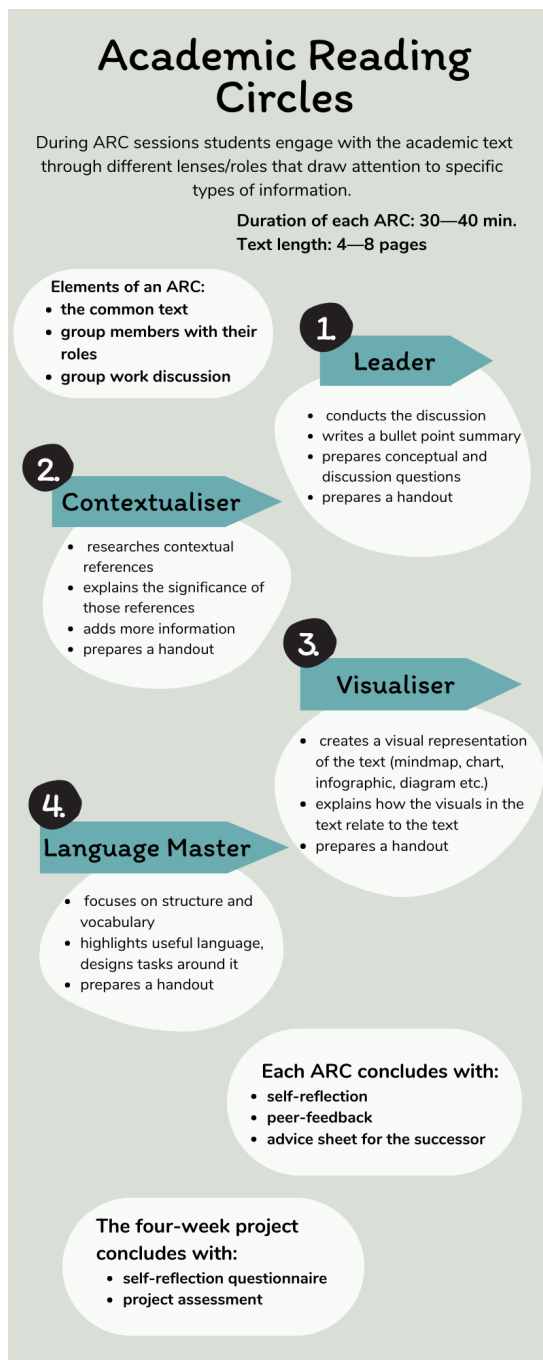


Figure 1. Initial introduction to the project

Source: own elaboration based on Seburn, 2015.

LEADER

Main task

You are the moderator of the group work. You briefly summarise the text, check comprehension, make sure everyone contributes equally, lead the discussion and watch the time.

Preparation

- Choose 4 quotes from the text that you find important (or interesting) and compose 4 citation entries (in-text and bibliographic) for the text using the accepted referencing system (APA 7).

Look at one example of such an entry:

In-text citation: Smith believes that the unclear role Jarvis plays for traffic flow “pits motorist versus cyclist versus pedestrian...” (2015: 16).

Bibliographic citation: A. Smith (2015). What to do with the oddball Jarvis Street? *Cityscape Magazine*, 16–18.

Divide the text into sections by subtopic and/or function.

- Compose a bullet-point summary of the text.
- Create 3+ **challenging** conceptual questions and answers from the common text.
- Create 3+ **interesting** discussion questions (answers to be discussed in groups).
- Include outline and summary, 6+ questions (without answers) and bibliographic information on an attractively and creatively designed handout for group members.

Group work

Facilitate basic comprehension using 3 conceptual questions. Discuss the summary. Moderate group members' contributions by time and relevance. Lead your group chat using the 3 discussion questions.

This procedure typically looks like this:

1. The Leader summarises the text using the bullet point summary on the handout then shares conceptual questions which the group works together to answer using the common text.
2. All group members share the information they have discovered through their roles using and showing their handouts.
3. All members listen, ask for clarification, and add to their own comprehension.
4. The Leader initiates and manages an academic discussion based on prepared discussion questions.

CONTEXTUALISER

Main task

Your task is to add more to the understanding of the text or, in other words, put the text in a wider context. You research any references that you think are either unexplained or especially important. Those references may be the names of people, places, events, processes, methods or issues mentioned in the text. You may also look at the bibliography and search through the texts there. You decide which references are worth exploring.

Preparation

- Identify at least 10 contextual references used by the text author. You want to divide them into categories which will be different for different texts (people, places, events, processes, methods, questions, difficulties etc.).
- Highlight unexplained contextual references that seem important.
- Research 4–6 contextual references in detail in order to learn more information about them in relation to points in the text.
- You will want to summarise your research and describe, in your own words, what else you have managed to find on the topic of any place, person or event mentioned in the text.
- Do your research thoroughly.
- Use footnotes and/or hyperlinks.
- Include key new information on an attractively designed handout for your group members (this can be done in the form of a mind-map, bullet-point summary, list etc.)

Group work

Explain how the contextual references improve the understanding of points in the text. Talk about your chosen 4–6 references in more detail. Present and talk over your handout. What do the references add or clarify? How might they be important?

VISUALISER

Main task

You represent the text in a visual manner. You help your classmates to understand the text better by providing reliable photos, graphs, charts, or even animations, connected with the text. You will create at least one graphic yourself.

Preparation

- Choose 4 quotes from the text that you find important or interesting and compose 4 citation entries (in-text and bibliographic) for the text using the accepted referencing system (APA 7).

Look at one example of such an entry:

In-text citation: Smith believes that the unclear role Jarvis plays for traffic flow “pits motorist versus cyclist versus pedestrian...” (2015: 17).

Bibliographic citation: A. Smith (2015). What to do with the oddball Jarvis Street? *Cityscape Magazine*, 16–18.

- Find and/or create your own 4+ visuals of 2 different types that represent text concepts. They should help understand the ideas in the text in a more complete way. Depending on the text, the visuals can come in different forms: photos, images, timelines, maps, cartoons, charts, polls, graphs.
- Your own graphics will be most valuable; much can be done using www.canva.com.
- Remember about copyright; record the source of the visuals. Sources under Creative Commons licence include: <https://pixabay.com/>, <https://www.pexels.com/pl-pl/>, <https://unsplash.com/>.
- Prepare an explanation of how the visuals relate to the text. Include both visuals, bibliographic source information, and brief explanations of them and their connection to the text on an **attractively** and **creatively** designed handout for group members.

Group work

Introduce each graphic to the group and **explain** why you chose it, and how it specifically relates to the content. Your visuals **should not** be simply decorations.

LANGUAGE MASTER**Main task**

You focus on and work with language: both grammar and vocabulary. You highlight relevant language and create your own language tasks.

Preparation

- Highlight the following types of vocabulary from the text:

Key vocabulary: Choose 6+ key words or phrases that either repeat or show importance in the text. Consult a dictionary and paraphrase definitions for each. Write the example sentence from the text that uses that vocabulary.

Topical vocabulary: Assemble topically-related words or phrases into at least 3 categories related to the topic and/or subtopics. Create a chart of at least 5 words and phrases in each category and their related word family members.

Academic language: Highlight examples of academic language e.g., inversion, passive structures, nominalisations.

Tonal language: Identify words or phrases that demonstrate the author's perspective related to bias, emotion, or emphasis.

- Make sure you can answer any questions from your group about any vocabulary or grammar points in the text.
- Make your own 2+ different language exercises for the group, e.g., gap-fill, matching, multiple choice or true or false task types etc.
- Include examples from the different vocabulary types and your language exercises on an attractively and creatively designed handout for group members.

Group work

Show your handout with the highlighted vocabulary. Discuss how the author uses these terms. Test your groupmates using your language exercises.

Preparation of students – additional comments

Depending on the level of the group, presenting and discussing consecutive roles using the handouts above may or may not be sufficient for them to feel they know what they should do. More often than not, however, it will be necessary to have a sort of abridged mock form of an ARC with all students working on a text in class under the guidance of the teacher. The teacher, knowing the group, may choose areas that will probably cause confusion or difficulty. From my experience, the three elements that need special attention, before starting ARCs in earnest, are: the composition of in-text citations connected with the accepted referencing

style, certain tasks linked to the role of the Contextualiser (such as researching chosen contextual references or identifying those that seem worthwhile) and the creation of different categories of language together with vocabulary or grammar exercises, which comprise a large part of what the Language Master must prepare. Another helpful practice is showing students the handouts created by another group (if possible).

Feedback and self-reflection

Feedback

This follow-up stage takes place after each ARC and many students love it. They can't wait to share their own reflections and advice for their successor. This debriefing exercise provides them with a chance to sit back and assess how well they have performed. I decide not to interfere at this stage in any way, nor to read the comments. They can write freely and my only concern is to make sure each student receives this feedback and advice from their groupmate. I give each group member a little slip of paper with a few questions. The one below pertains to the role of the Leader, though any of the other roles can obviously be substituted here.

Follow-up

Prepare an advice sheet to give to the next Leader answering the questions:

What did you find easiest and hardest about being the Leader this week? Why?

Did anything happen during the group work discussion that was unexpected?

What advice would you give the next Leader?

The end of project self-reflection

During their time at university, students are regularly encouraged to assess courses and lecturers; however, in my opinion opportunities for self-reflection are few and far between. This is quite unfortunate as self-reflection is linked to better motivation and it also 'creates more opportunities for them to think critically, and also enhances their learning experience'. (Ziemińska, 2023: 108) It is also a transferable skill that will definitely be required from them in the course of their professional lives.

I would like to share some insights from a self-reflection questionnaire collected anonymously from each of my five groups at the end of the project. The results are optimistic with the overall assessment of the whole four-week long cycle of ARCs, from all the five groups, varying from 4.18 to 4.38 (out of 5.0).

What was the most difficult for my students?

Overall, the role of a Contextualiser was deemed to be the hardest and most stressful. These are some typical answers to the question ‘Which role did you like least?’:

Contextualiser because it was the hardest role.

Contextualiser, because it was hard to group the ideas and also finding which things were also worth mentioning.

[...] it hurts me to pick because i truly liked all of them, but I guess contextualiser was just overall the most exhausting. A lot of fact checking and research.

Contextualiser. I just found it a bit challenging and not as pleasant to do because of the type of information from the text I had to focus on while reading.

Contextualiser. Time consuming and it was hard to decide which concept should i choose to explain.

Contextualiser – you had to really understand the text in order to properly do your job as a contextualiser and I had some issues with comprehending some of the articles’.

The answers to the biggest challenge question can be grouped into the following categories:

- handout preparation,
- creating discussion questions and conducting discussions as a leader,
- finding time to read academic texts and preparing for each ARC properly,
- time management,
- speaking in front of a group,
- deciding on what is important and what to focus on in the text,
- preparing for the role of a contextualiser and/or leader (the most labour-intensive in their opinion).

I also asked students what other skills, not necessarily connected with the development of language, they felt they might have developed while doing ARCs. The most common answers referred to development of social skills through interaction with their classmates, coming out of one’s comfort zone, striking up a conversation, as well as time management, self-discipline, research and using new software such as Canva.

Which role turned out to be the most fun? Interestingly, all three roles: leader, visualiser and language master, were indicated in more or less equal numbers to be the most enjoyable.

What surprised them?

On the one hand there were a lot of comments on how time-consuming it was to prepare for each ARC:

The amount of work you have to put in.

How hard it is to make your work stand out visually; how much preparation it takes.

How hard is for me to read carefully and understand what I am reading because I lose focus quickly.

On the other hand, many answers referred to how much they enjoyed themselves:

To be honest, at first I was thinking it was hard to manage and to do the handouts but it ended up being fun to do.

I was surprised that I actually enjoyed it.

What surprised me the most was that no matter what the topic was our team was able to have a really valuable conversation and sometimes even an argument.

I was surprised about how motivated I was to create nice handouts even though I was busy and tired; I thought it would be more boring and stressful but in reality it was quite interesting.

I didn't think it would be this fun. Not really, maybe only in a positive way. I thought it would be more stressful for me but it turned out to be completely stress free after the first ARC.

Many comments showed appreciation of other classmates' skills and level of language:

How talented my classmates are.

My group was excellent and really open-minded sharing a lot of thoughts.

Because of my group I wasn't stressed at all.

Other people's skills when it comes to making the handouts; People who have beat accents are the most shy.

I also asked students for some tips on how I might improve the project for future use. The most common answers were: choice of articles, allowing more time for discussions and greater rotation of people between groups so students do not work with the same people in each ARC. I'm most certainly going to implement all of the suggestions next time round.

Would they take part in an ARC again? Only 10% of students wouldn't take part in such a project again, while 50% of them answered 'probably yes' and 40% – 'definitely yes.'

For a more balanced view, I would like to show a few critical comments, though I must add, they did constitute the minority.

It could've work much better if all participants would work, but sometimes people just wouldn't come, so you would only have two people working in the group.

It's an interesting project, though it's hard for me to tell if I learned something new, the randomness of texts was a problem for me.

Not a bad idea, but would prefer if it was more focused on discussion of the topic, less on the grammatical, vocabulary etc.

The teacher's perspective

How to assess

Continuous assessment is what works best. My own personal take on how to assess students is that for each ARC, an individual student can earn 10 points maximum: 5 points for the handout, which for me is the evidence of preparation, and another 5 points for active participation in the group discussion. I have to be vigilant, take notes all the time, observe without seeming to pry, and reflect on my assessment later again after I have analysed every handout. Meticulous score keeping is a must. Needless to say, if I have any doubts about how many points a given student should be awarded or, in other words, if I have to make a 'mistake' at this point, let it be always to the student's advantage.

What surprised me

With all of my groups I was pleasantly surprised how involved most of the students were. With my last C2 group I was somewhat puzzled by how much pressure they put on themselves for their handouts to look presentable and visually attractive (and not only as Visualisers); it was something I did not require but it reached the point whereby students were uploading 8-page long handouts prepared in Canva. Another thing that surprised me was how good attendance was with around 90–100% of students present at each ARC.

Lessons for the future

The role of Contextualiser should be practised with all the students first, on a common text to avoid confusion and stress during preparation for ARCs since this role comes out in self-reflection polls as the most difficult.

Variations

Obviously, the roles that I have described are the ones that I have decided to include but they are by no means fixed. One thing that seems to be unquestionable is that in each group there must always be a Leader, whose main task is to facilitate group work by providing comprehension and discussion questions. All the other roles can be modified or substituted with different ones. For example, there might also be a Connector, who mainly connects the common text with two or three other texts on the same topic – quite a demanding role, I think. Another addition might be a Critic or Devil's Advocate, who might find all arguments to be to the contrary and here in order to question the thesis of the article under discussion.

Students, especially if it's their first ARC ever may benefit from first comparing their handouts with other students with the same roles. This gives them a chance to discuss their process, compare the results i.e., the handout, and discuss anything they may have found difficult or unclear. It often turns into a sort of debriefing exercise which lessens the pressures of participating in something

which for them is a new project. I sometimes do this before they start working in their groups.

Final note

I will definitely keep Academic Reading Circles within my syllabus. I can see how it motivates and engages my students, how they hold each other accountable and usually do not miss classes when ARCs are conducted, and how their language and social skills develop. It is a kind of project that they have not done before and students at tertiary level do expect to experience something new, something different from what they had been exposed to at primary and secondary school. Even though ARCs are labour intensive and they make students leave their comfort zones given the emphasis on collaboration, the overwhelming positive feedback renders them worth doing for the years to come.

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