

LITERATURE CIRCLES USING CLASSIC INDONESIAN SHORT STORIES TO IMPROVE CRITICAL SPEAKING SKILLS

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Keywords

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Senyum Karyamin
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Abstract

This study investigates the use of literature circles with the Indonesian classic short story Senyum Karyamin to improve EFL students' critical speaking skills. The research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design consisting of two cycles: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The participants were 20 university students enrolled in an English speaking class. Data were collected through speaking performance tests, classroom observations, field notes, and students' reflection journals. Quantitative data were analyzed using mean score comparison, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis and triangulation. The results indicate significant improvement in students' speaking performance. The overall mean speaking score increased from 67.6 in Cycle 1 to 80.0 in Cycle 2. The percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery level (≥ 70) rose from 50% to 90%. Observation data also revealed increased classroom engagement, with active participation improving from 60% to 90% and use of English during discussion from 58% to 86%. Reflection journals further indicated growth in students' confidence, organization of ideas, and moral engagement with the literary text. These findings suggest that literature circles using culturally relevant literary texts can effectively promote communicative competence, critical thinking, and collaborative learning in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: literature circles, critical speaking skills, classroom action research, EFL, Senyum Karyamin

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INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been recognized as a valuable resource in English language education because it exposes learners to authentic language, diverse cultures, and complex human experiences. In recent decades, scholars have emphasized that literature plays a vital role in developing learners' linguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and higher-order thinking (Carter, 2015). The use of literary texts encourages students not only to read for meaning but also to interpret, evaluate and communicate their critical thoughts. In the context of EFL, integrating literature into classroom instruction provides a natural environment for meaningful language use. However, despite these advantages, many EFL classrooms still prioritize mechanical learning of grammar and vocabulary over critical engagement with texts. This approach often limits students' opportunities to express their thoughts verbally and analytically. As stated by Mustafa & Hamad (2023), Indonesian EFL learners frequently struggle to articulate critical opinions because classroom practices tend to focus on accuracy rather than communicative competence. Consequently, students may achieve linguistic knowledge but cannot communicate complex ideas effectively.

To overcome these challenges, literature-based instruction offers an alternative pedagogical strategy that combines linguistic and cognitive development. Lazar (1996) notes that literary texts motivate learners by appealing to their imagination and emotions, creating deeper personal connections with the language. When students discuss literature, they are encouraged to share their perspectives, make inferences, and negotiate meaning, all of which promote fluency and critical speaking skills. Thus, literature functions not only as a cultural artifact but also as a dynamic tool for language learning. Among literature-based strategies, literature circles have emerged as a particularly effective and student-centered method. Daniels (2023) describes literature circles as small, peer-led discussion groups where members read the same text and share insights through assigned roles. This method shifts classroom authority from teacher to students, fostering autonomy and collaboration. In literature circles, students take on rotating roles such as discussion leader, connector, summarizer, and vocabulary master, which guide them to analyze, question, and respond critically to the text.

The literature circles support multiple language skills, including speaking, reading, and critical thinking (Ma et al., 2023). For instance, Shelton-Strong (2012) found that literature circles increase learners' confidence in speaking English because discussions occur in a low-anxiety environment where students interact as equals. This interaction encourages spontaneous communication and helps students internalize language patterns naturally. Moreover, the collaborative nature of literature circles allows learners to construct meaning in society, which aligns with Vygotsky & Cole's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizing learning through interaction. The present study focuses on the use of classical Indonesian short stories as the main literary material within literature circles. Short stories are ideal for EFL learners because they are concise, accessible, and contain clear narrative structures (Ceylan, 2016). Classic short stories, in particular, often address universal themes such as morality, struggle, and human dignity, which resonate with students' experiences. Through the discussion of such texts, learners can explore values and emotions that transcend boundaries while simultaneously practising English in meaningful contexts.

Ahmad Tohari's *Senyum Karyamin* (Tohari, 2013) is one of Indonesia's most acclaimed classic short stories. Published in 1989, it portrays the life of a poor yet optimistic worker, Karyamin, who faces hardship with humility and resilience. The story reflects social realism and moral strength, making it a powerful text for educational purposes (Mahaswa & Syaja, 2025). Using *Senyum Karyamin* in an EFL classroom creates opportunities for students to connect language learning with local cultural values. Tom et al (2019) state that integrating local literature into English education fosters "glocal" understanding of global communication through local cultural identity. By discussing Indonesian literary

texts in English, students strengthen both their national cultural awareness and their ability to communicate those ideas globally.

In terms of speaking development, literature circles provide structured yet flexible discussion platforms that encourage students to think critically and speak meaningfully. During each session, learners perform different roles that require active participation. For example, the connector relates the story's message to real-life situations, while the critic evaluates the author's techniques and moral implications. This rotational system ensures that every student contributes from multiple perspectives, promoting linguistic fluency and intellectual depth. Moreover, *literature circles* align well with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles that emphasize authentic interaction and learner autonomy (McCarthy & Carter, 2006). The focus shifts from teacher-centered instruction to collaborative meaning-making among students. Through repeated cycles of discussion, learners gain confidence to express personal interpretations, disagree respectfully, and justify opinions using evidence from the text. Such practices develop both linguistic competence and critical literacy.

Previous studies have demonstrated the positive outcomes of implementing literature circles in EFL contexts. Ma et al. (2023) reported that students participating in literature circles showed improved speaking fluency and analytical reasoning. These findings highlight the adaptability of literature circles across cultural and linguistic settings. Despite these benefits, limited research has explored the use of *Indonesian classic short stories* within literature circles to improve speaking performance. Most existing studies employ Western texts such as those by Poe or Hemingway, which may not fully reflect students' sociocultural background. Incorporating *Senyum Karyamin* offers a novel contribution by demonstrating how local literary works can serve as rich, culturally resonant material for communicative English learning.

This pedagogical approach also supports critical literacy, which encourages learners to question and interpret social realities represented in texts (Wallace & Wallace, 2003). When students discuss *Senyum Karyamin*, they confront issues of poverty, social inequality, and human resilience topics that invite moral reflection and debate. Through critical discussion, learners move beyond comprehension toward social awareness and empathy, which are essential components of 21st-century education (Novianti et al., 2020). In addition, integrating literature circles aligns with classroom action research (CAR) principles that emphasize reflective teaching and continuous improvement (Kemmis et al., 2015). Through cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, teachers can systematically evaluate the effectiveness of literary discussions in enhancing speaking skills. CAR allows the researcher to identify problems, apply interventions, and measure progress in authentic classroom settings. In light of these considerations, this study aims to implement literature circles using Ahmad Tohari's *Senyum Karyamin* to improve EFL students' critical speaking skills. The objectives are twofold: (1) to describe how literature circles can be effectively integrated into English language instruction using an Indonesian short story, and (2) to examine the impact of this approach on students' ability to articulate critical, reflective, and culturally informed ideas in English. By merging local literature and communicative pedagogy, this research aspires to contribute to more meaningful and culturally responsive English language education in Indonesia.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, which focuses on improving teaching and learning processes through systematic and reflective action. (Kemmis et al., 2015) Classroom action research consists of four recurring stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This cyclical process allows the researcher to identify classroom problems, implement instructional strategies, observe their effects, and make necessary improvements in subsequent cycles. In this research, the CAR design was

used to determine how implementing *literature circles* using Ahmad Tohari's *Senyum Karyamin* could enhance students' critical speaking skills. The study consisted of two cycles, each conducted over three class meetings.

Research Procedure

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design to improve students' critical speaking skills through the implementation of literature circles. Classroom Action Research emphasizes reflective and cyclical processes consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages (Burns, 2009). The study was conducted in two cycles, each comprising three classroom meetings. The participants were selected based on preliminary classroom observation indicating that they experienced difficulty in articulating critical opinions during speaking activities. The researcher acted as the classroom instructor, while a colleague served as an independent observer to enhance objectivity. During the planning stage, the researcher identified students' limited ability to express analytical ideas in spoken English and designed lesson plans integrating literature circles as the core instructional strategy. The short story *Senyum Karyamin* by Ahmad Tohari was selected due to its cultural relevance and rich moral themes. Students were assigned rotating roles, including discussion leader, connector, summarizer, and vocabulary master.

In the acting stage, students were divided into groups of four to five members and conducted peer-led discussions in English. The lecturer functioned as a facilitator rather than a dominant speaker during the observation and audio recording. Finally, in the reflecting stage, the researcher analyzed students' speaking performance and classroom dynamics to determine necessary improvements for the subsequent cycle.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through classroom observation, speaking performance tests, students' reflection journals, and field notes. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Quantitative data from speaking performance tests were calculated using mean scores and percentage improvement between cycles. The minimum mastery level was set at 70. Qualitative data from classroom observation, field notes, and students' reflection journals were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher coded recurring themes related to confidence, participation, critical expression, and collaborative interaction. Data triangulation was applied by comparing speaking scores, observation checklist results, field notes documentation, and students' written reflections.

RESULT

Students' Speaking Test Scores

Speaking performance was assessed based on five indicators: fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar accuracy, and critical expression. The evaluation was conducted at the end of each cycle.

Table 1. Students' Average Speaking Score (N=20)

Indicators	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Improvement
Fluency	66	79	13
Pronunciation	68	81	13
Vocabulary Use	67	80	13
Grammar Accuracy	68	78	10
Critical Expression	69	82	13
Overall mean	67.6	80.0	12.4

The mastery-level analysis shows a substantial improvement between cycles. In Cycle 1, 10 out of 20 students (50%) achieved the minimum mastery score of 70, while the

remaining 10 students (50%) obtained scores ranging from 58 to 69. The lowest score recorded in Cycle 1 was 58, and the highest was 75. In Cycle 2, 18 students (90%) achieved scores ≥ 70 , and only two students (10%) remained slightly below the threshold with scores of 68 and 69. The score range shifted upward to 72–88. This change represents a 40 percentage-point increase in mastery attainment and reflects a structural upward shift in performance distribution.

To further clarify the distributional change, students' scores were grouped into three performance bands: low (≤ 65), middle (66–79), and high (≥ 80). In Cycle 1, six students were in the low band, fourteen in the middle band, and none in the high band. In Cycle 2, no students remained in the low band, eight were in the middle band, and twelve moved into the high-performance band (80–88). This redistribution indicates not only increased mastery but also advancement into higher proficiency levels.

At the individual level, three students who obtained the lowest scores in Cycle 1 (58, 60, and 62) improved to 72, 74, and 76 in Cycle 2, representing gains of 14, 14, and 14 points, respectively. Similarly, five students who initially scored between 65 and 69 progressed into the 78–84 range. Importantly, no student demonstrated score regression between cycles. These data suggest consistent upward movement rather than isolated improvement among a few individuals.

Qualitative observation records support this quantitative shift. In Cycle 1, students below the mastery threshold typically produced one- to two-sentence responses, relied heavily on written notes, and required explicit prompting from the lecturer. Their responses were predominantly descriptive (e.g., identifying character traits or summarizing events). In Cycle 2, most students were able to produce extended responses of four to six sentences, justify their opinions with textual references to *Senyum Karyamin*, and respond to peer arguments without teacher intervention. The integration of textual evidence indicates deeper cognitive processing and improved discourse control.

The reduction from 10 students below mastery in Cycle 1 to only 2 in Cycle 2 reflects a narrowing of performance disparity within the classroom. Rather than benefiting only high-performing students, the literature circle intervention appears to have facilitated collective advancement, particularly among previously lower-performing learners. This pattern suggests that the instructional strategy contributed to a more equitable distribution of speaking competence across the class.

Table 2. Percentage of Students Meeting The Minimum Mastery Level

Category	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Students achieving score ≥ 70	10 students (50%)	18 Students (90%)
Students below score 70	10 students (50%)	2 Students (10%)

The data show that in Cycle 1, 10 out of 20 students (50%) achieved the minimum mastery score of 70, while the remaining 10 students (50%) scored between 58 and 69. In Cycle 2, 18 students (90%) achieved scores equal to or higher than 70, leaving only two students (10%) below the mastery threshold. This represents a 40 percentage-point increase in mastery achievement between cycles.

A closer examination of score distribution reveals a significant upward shift. In Cycle 1, no student scored above 80, and the majority clustered between 65 and 72. In Cycle 2, however, 12 students scored between 80 and 88, indicating not only that more students reached mastery level, but that many progressed into a higher performance category.

Observation records indicate that students who scored below 70 in Cycle 1 typically produced short responses consisting of one to two sentences and required frequent prompting from the lecturer. In Cycle 2, most students were able to deliver extended responses of four to six sentences and provide textual references to specific events or moral themes in *Senyum Karyamin* to support their arguments.

Furthermore, the reduction from 10 students below mastery level in Cycle 1 to only 2 students in Cycle 2 suggests a narrowing of performance disparity within the classroom. This indicates that the literature circle intervention did not only benefit high-performing students but also supported lower-performing learners in reaching the expected competency level.

Table 3. Observation Data on Participation and Engagement

Observation Aspect	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Active Participation	60%	90%
Use of English during Discussion	58%	86%
Asking/responding to questions	52%	83%
Confidence to speak	55%	88%
Critical contribution	48%	82%

Observation data were collected using a structured checklist across three meetings in each cycle. The checklist measured five aspects: active participation, use of English, initiation of responses, confidence indicators, and critical contribution.

The results indicate that active participation increased from 60% in Cycle 1 to 90% in Cycle 2. In numerical terms, this means that in Cycle 1, only 12 out of 20 students consistently engaged in discussion by asking or answering questions. In Cycle 2, this number increased to 18 students who actively participated without requiring teacher prompting.

Similarly, the use of English during discussion improved from 58% to 86%. In Cycle 1, approximately 11–12 students were able to maintain English throughout their responses, while others frequently switched to Indonesian when encountering vocabulary gaps. In contrast, during Cycle 2, 17 students maintained English interaction even when experiencing lexical difficulty. Rather than switching languages, students attempted paraphrasing strategies such as using simpler synonyms, descriptive explanations, or examples to clarify meaning.

Field notes from Cycle 1 documented several hesitation patterns, including long pauses (5–8 seconds), nervous laughter, and minimal elaboration. Many responses consisted of short phrases such as “Yes, I agree” or “He is kind.” By Cycle 2, these patterns were reduced significantly. Students produced extended responses of four to six sentences and began initiating follow-up questions to peers, such as:

“Why do you think Karyamin keeps smiling despite poverty?”

“Do you think his attitude reflects social criticism?”

Critical contribution showed the most substantial behavioral shift, increasing from 48% in Cycle 1 to 82% in Cycle 2. In practical terms, this indicates that in Cycle 1, fewer than half of the students moved beyond retelling plot events. Most comments were descriptive, focusing on character traits or story summary. In Cycle 2, however, 16 students were observed interpreting moral implications and discussing broader social themes such as inequality, dignity, and resilience in *Senyum Karyamin*.

Overall, the observational data demonstrate not only increased frequency of participation but also qualitative improvement in discourse depth. The shift from passive, teacher-dependent interaction toward voluntary, peer-driven discussion reflects a transition from surface-level engagement to critical dialogic exchange.

Reflection

Analysis of 20 reflection journals was conducted using thematic coding. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) increased speaking confidence, (2) improved organization of ideas through structured roles, and (3) deeper moral and cultural engagement with the text.

Seventeen students explicitly mentioned reduced anxiety and increased willingness to speak in English during Cycle 2. In Cycle 1, many students described fear of making grammatical errors or being judged by peers.

One student wrote:

“In the first meeting I was afraid of making grammar mistakes, but in the second cycle I felt braver because my friends listened to my ideas”

Another student stated:

“I was nervous at first, but after discussion practice I feel more confident to speak without waiting for the lecturer”

These reflections indicate a reduction in affective barriers and suggest that peer-supported discussion contributed to increased communicative confidence.

Fifteen students reported that the rotating discussion roles helped them structure their thoughts before speaking.

One student reflected:

“The connector role helped me relate the story to real life, so I had more ideas to say.”

Another student wrote:

“When I became discussion leader, I had to prepare questions, so I learned how to organize my ideas better.”

These comments demonstrate cognitive scaffolding, as students relied on role-based preparation to articulate clearer and more structured responses.

Fourteen students expressed emotional or moral connection to the themes presented in *Senyum Karyamin*.

One student stated:

“It is easier to speak English when the story is close to Indonesian life.”

Another reflection noted:

“The story teaches patience and dignity. I feel connected to Karyamin’s struggle.”

These reflections suggest that cultural familiarity facilitated deeper engagement and encouraged students to move beyond surface-level retelling toward interpretative and evaluative discussion.

The convergence of these three themes confidence development, structured idea organization, and cultural engagement indicates that improvement occurred across affective, cognitive, and linguistic domains. The reflection data therefore corroborate the quantitative gains observed in speaking scores and mastery levels, strengthening the internal validity of the study through methodological triangulation.

DISCUSSION

Improvement in Speaking Performance

The findings demonstrate a substantial improvement in students’ speaking performance following the implementation of literature circles. As shown in Table 1, the overall mean speaking score increased from 67.6 in Cycle 1 to 80.0 in Cycle 2, representing an

improvement of 12.4 points. All five assessed indicators fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, grammar accuracy, and critical expression showed consistent gains. Fluency increased from 66 to 79, indicating that students became more spontaneous and less hesitant when expressing their ideas. Similarly, pronunciation improved from 68 to 81, suggesting clearer articulation and more confident speech delivery. Vocabulary use increased from 67 to 80, reflecting students' growing ability to employ varied lexical expressions during discussion. Grammar accuracy improved from 68 to 78, demonstrating gradual structural development alongside communicative confidence. The most notable improvement occurred in critical expression, which rose from 69 to 82, indicating that students increasingly moved beyond simple description toward analytical and evaluative responses.

These improvements suggest that literature circle discussions provided repeated opportunities for meaningful oral interaction, which facilitated the development of communicative competence. This finding aligns with the principles of communicative language teaching, which emphasize authentic communication and learner interaction as central components of language acquisition (Richards, 2006).

Increased Mastery Achievement and Performance Distribution

In addition to the improvement in mean scores, the mastery-level analysis demonstrates a significant shift in overall student achievement. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery level (≥ 70) increased from 50% in Cycle 1 to 90% in Cycle 2, representing a 40 percentage-point increase.

The distribution of scores also shifted toward higher performance categories. In Cycle 1, the majority of students clustered within the 65–72 score range, and no student obtained a score above 80. By contrast, in Cycle 2, twelve students achieved scores between 80 and 88, indicating not only that more students reached the mastery threshold but also that many advanced to a higher proficiency level.

At the individual level, students who initially demonstrated the lowest performance showed notable progress. For example, three students who obtained scores of 58, 60, and 62 in Cycle 1 improved to 72, 74, and 76 in Cycle 2. This upward movement suggests that the intervention supported not only high-performing learners but also students who initially struggled with speaking tasks. The reduction from ten students below the mastery level to only two students indicates a narrowing of the performance gap within the classroom.

These findings highlight the collaborative nature of literature circles, where peer discussion creates a supportive learning environment that enables learners to build speaking competence gradually.

Increased Participation and Communicative Engagement

Observation data presented in Table 3 further demonstrate that literature circles positively influenced classroom interaction patterns. Active participation increased from 60% in Cycle 1 to 90% in Cycle 2, indicating that most students became actively involved in group discussions. Similarly, the use of English during discussion improved from 58% to 86%, suggesting greater willingness to maintain communication in the target language.

The data also show improvement in students' confidence to speak, which rose from 55% to 88%, while critical contribution increased from 48% to 82%. These findings indicate that students gradually moved from passive participation toward active engagement in analytical dialogue.

Field notes revealed that during Cycle 1, many students produced short responses consisting of one or two sentences and frequently switched to Indonesian when encountering vocabulary difficulties. In Cycle 2, however, students began to produce extended responses and attempted paraphrasing strategies instead of code-switching. This

behavioral shift suggests that the discussion-based structure of literature circles encouraged learners to take communicative risks and negotiate meaning collaboratively. From a theoretical perspective, this pattern supports Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and collaborative dialogue (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Through peer discussion, students were able to scaffold each other's language production and gradually increase their communicative confidence.

Development of Critical and Cultural Engagement

Another significant outcome of this study is the development of students' critical and cultural awareness through the discussion of Ahmad Tohari's *Senyum Karyamin*. Observation and reflection data indicate that students progressed from simple narrative retelling toward deeper interpretation of the story's moral and social themes.

In Cycle 1, most students' responses were descriptive, focusing primarily on identifying character traits or summarizing events. In Cycle 2, however, students began interpreting broader issues such as poverty, dignity, resilience, and social inequality. These discussions demonstrate the emergence of critical literacy, where learners engage with texts not only for comprehension but also for interpretation and evaluation.

Students' reflection journals further indicate that cultural familiarity with the story facilitated engagement and expression. Many students reported that discussing a story rooted in Indonesian social realities made it easier for them to generate ideas and express opinions in English. This finding supports the concept of glocalized learning, which integrates local cultural content within global language education contexts (Crosthwaite, 2018).

By combining culturally relevant literary texts with collaborative discussion structures, literature circles created a meaningful learning environment that promoted linguistic development, critical thinking, and cultural reflection simultaneously. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of research on literature-based language instruction by demonstrating how culturally relevant literary texts can support the development of critical speaking skills in EFL contexts. While previous studies on literature circles often utilize Western literary works, this study highlights the pedagogical value of Indonesian classic literature as a meaningful discussion medium. The integration of *Senyum Karyamin* within literature circles illustrates how local narratives can facilitate communicative competence, cultural awareness, and critical literacy simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that implementing literature circles using *Senyum Karyamin* effectively improved students' critical speaking skills in an EFL classroom. The findings show substantial progress in speaking performance, as indicated by the increase in the overall mean score from 67.6 in Cycle 1 to 80.0 in Cycle 2. The percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery level also increased significantly from 50% to 90%, indicating broader learning improvement across the class. Observation results revealed that literature circles fostered greater student participation, confidence, and sustained use of English during discussion. Students became more willing to express ideas, ask questions, and engage in peer interaction. In addition, reflection journals indicated that students experienced reduced speaking anxiety, improved organization of ideas through discussion roles, and deeper moral engagement with the themes presented in the story. Overall, literature circles created a collaborative and culturally meaningful learning environment that supported linguistic, cognitive, and affective development simultaneously. The findings highlight the pedagogical value of integrating Indonesian literary texts into English language teaching to enhance critical speaking skills and cultural awareness among EFL learners. Future studies may explore the use of other local

literary works or apply literature circles in different educational contexts to further examine their impact on language learning and critical literacy development.

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