



REVISTA KRONOS

Implementing Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique to improve tenth-grade students' reading comprehension

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ABSTRACT Education First (2022) and the British Council (2015) claim that there is a lack of reading culture among the population, affecting both English and their native language. Reading comprehension skills development is, therefore, crucial for EFL students since it allows them to access primary sources, expand their vocabulary and language proficiency, succeed academically, and foster lifelong learning and personal development. Thus, EFL teachers should focus on improving their students' reading skills to increase their English language competency (Casco and Mayorga, 2021). For this reason, the current study sought to investigate how the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique affected the reading comprehension abilities of tenth-grade students at a public high school in Cuenca, Ecuador. The present study employed both quantitative and qualitative tools within an Exploratory Action Research framework. This included diagnostic and summative tests and written reflections, collected before and after the CIRC intervention. The research found that the CIRC technique significantly improved reading comprehension and motivated students. Cooperative methods, such as the CIRC technique, enhance reading comprehension, communication, critical thinking, academic skills, and peer-social connections, making it a valuable tool for educators.

KEYWORDS Cooperative learning, Reading comprehension, Exploratory Action Research.

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Implementación de la técnica de Lectura y Composición Cooperativa Integrada (CIRC) para mejorar la comprensión lectora de los alumnos de décimo año de Educación General Básica.

RESUMEN Education First (2022) y British Council (2015) afirman que existe una falta de cultura lectora en la población, lo que afecta tanto al inglés como a su lengua materna. Por lo tanto, el desarrollo de la comprensión lectora es crucial para los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), ya que les permite acceder a fuentes primarias, ampliar su vocabulario y dominio del idioma, alcanzar el éxito académico y fomentar el aprendizaje permanente y el desarrollo personal. Por lo tanto, los docentes de EFL deben centrarse en mejorar las habilidades lectoras de sus estudiantes para aumentar su competencia en inglés (Casco y Mayorga, 2021). Por esta razón, el presente estudio buscó investigar cómo la técnica de Lectura y Composición Cooperativa Integrada (CIRC) afectó las habilidades de comprensión lectora de estudiantes de décimo grado en una escuela secundaria pública en Cuenca, Ecuador. El presente estudio empleó herramientas cuantitativas y cualitativas dentro del marco de la Investigación Acción Exploratoria. Esto incluyó pruebas diagnósticas y sumativas, y reflexiones escritas, recopiladas antes y después de la intervención CIRC. La investigación encontró que la técnica CIRC mejoró significativamente la comprensión lectora y motivó a los estudiantes. Los métodos cooperativos, como la técnica CIRC, mejoran la comprensión lectora, la comunicación, el pensamiento crítico, las habilidades académicas y las conexiones sociales entre pares, lo que la convierte en una herramienta valiosa para los educadores.

PALABRAS CLAVE Aprendizaje Cooperativo, Comprensión Lectora, Investigación Acción Exploratoria

INTRODUCTION

Many Ecuadorian EFL learners lack the ability to read in English, with only a minority engaging in reading for mandatory class assignments (Castillo, 2021). For instance, a study conducted by the British Council revealed that Ecuadorian EFL learners have limited reading skills due to infrequent reading in English (45%), short study periods (28%), and other factors related to the educational system (British Council, 2015). To further investigate this issue, a study by Jaramillo et al. (2019) revealed that a majority (62.19%) of participants struggled with English reading due to poor comprehension. Additionally, a study by Education First (EF, 2022) ranked Ecuadorians' English proficiency low among Latin American countries, indicating challenges with English proficiency and reading comprehension.

Developing reading comprehension skills is essential for students, as it gives them access to primary sources and supports their future academic achievements. Thus, EFL teachers must prioritize enhancing these skills since better comprehension enables learners to improve English proficiency. However, Alvarez and Ha (2022) highlight that in Ecuador, several challenges such as large class sizes, lack of teacher training, and heavy extra-curricular loads lead teachers to focus on traditional teaching. Consequently, this traditional teaching results in teachers mainly focusing on individual tasks centered around grammar and vocabulary teaching (Alvarez & Ha, 2022).

Traditional teaching methods often lead to students losing interest or becoming passive learners. To address these issues, a comprehensive approach is required. This approach should include active and collaborative learning, suitable reading exercises, and engaging materials (Casco & Mayorga, 2021). These components are essential for improving reading comprehension, cognitive abilities, and promoting lifelong learning. Carrillo et al. (2019) highlight that cooperative learning can encompass all these components and is crucial in EFL education. Employing cooperative instructional techniques, such as Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC), is vital for achieving the best outcomes for EFL learners (Umar Al Faruq et al., 2020). In line with this, the EFL Ecuadorian curriculum (2016) for middle-high school students strongly emphasizes collaborative and cooperative group work since it encourages students to take charge of their own learning, rather than depending on direct instruction.

PREVIOUS STUDIES: CIRC TECHNIQUE IN PRACTICE

Recent studies by Ghasemi and Baradaran (2018), Azhari et al. (2019), Asrifan and Octaberlina (2021), and Mahdahera and Ridwan (2023) have shown that implementing the CIRC strategy in EFL classrooms, which involves collaborative reading activities such as discussing and analyzing texts, can enhance students' comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking skills.

The CIRC technique, which emphasizes social interaction and peer support, is particularly beneficial for struggling readers. Studies by Ghasemi and Baradaran (2018), Azhari et al. (2019), and Asrifan and Octaberlina (2021) highlight that the CIRC technique differs from traditional reading methods by emphasizing group collaboration and writing activities. Under this technique, students work in small groups to read, analyze, discuss, and write about texts.

Additionally, Mahdahera and Ridwan's (2023) study found that using the CIRC technique led to three types of student engagement: behavioral (participating in discussions

and following instructions), emotional (expressing feelings during activities), and cognitive (completing tasks using different methods).

JUSTIFICATION

During the 2022-2023 academic year at a public school in Cuenca, Ecuador, participant observation and daily journal entries allowed the researchers to identify limited student interaction in a tenth-grade classroom. In this classroom, the teaching method primarily focused on grammar and vocabulary tasks. Additionally, when reading, some tenth-grade students faced difficulties in identifying the main idea, finding specific information, understanding text vocabulary, drawing conclusions, and relating the text content to their personal experiences.

Once these issues were identified, the researchers implemented the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique to enhance reading comprehension skills among tenth-grade EFL learners. This choice was supported by the EFL Ecuadorian curriculum (2016) and previous research by Ghasemi and Baradaran (2018), Azhari et al. (2019), Asrifan and Octaberlina (2021), and Mahdahera and Ridwan (2023), which detailed the benefits, such as participating in discussions, expressing feelings, and completing tasks using different methods, of cooperative and collaborative approaches in EFL classrooms and learners' reading abilities.

In addition, after reviewing the previous studies, the CIRC technique was selected because it enhances reading comprehension through cooperative activities and direct instruction, and promotes active engagement and collaboration among students (Hasjaya et al., 2022). Therefore, the present research study aimed to establish how the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique can improve the reading comprehension abilities of tenth-grade EFL learners and to find out how the technique affects learners' perceptions of EFL classes.

METHODOLOGY

The present research study employed Exploratory Action Research (EAR), using both quantitative and qualitative tools. According to Smith and Rebolledo (2019), EAR is a cyclical process that involves planning, exploration, analysis, reflection, and action to solve classroom problems. Therefore, this approach was selected for its effectiveness in addressing issues within the classroom setting where the researchers are involved.

PARTICIPANTS

Thirty-six tenth-grade students, aged 15-16, from a middle high school in Cuenca, Ecuador participated in this exploratory action research study. A contextualization journal administered during the 2022-2023 academic year revealed that the students had similar educational, and socio-economic backgrounds and received three hours of English instruction per week. Moreover, the researchers obtained the necessary permissions and informed consent, ensuring that confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained.

INSTRUMENTS FOR DATA COLLECTION

The study used written reflection journals before and after the CIRC intervention to encourage critical thinking about learners' learning experiences and identify areas for improvement. A Cambridge A2 reading exam served as both a diagnostic and summative test. The action phase began with a diagnostic test, followed by the CIRC intervention, and concluded with a final summative test to evaluate the intervention's effectiveness.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF INSTRUMENTS USED IN THE CIRC STUDY

The instruments employed in this Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) study exhibited high validity and reliability using a variety of verification approaches and statistical analyses.

The pre- and post-intervention tests had strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.85-0.88$), showing that the items accurately measured the same domain. They also showed good test-retest reliability ($r=0.79$), indicating that participants' scores were stable over time. Content validity was determined by expert evaluation and alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards, ensuring that the tests fully covered the intended topic.

The journal observation tools demonstrated high inter-rater reliability ($\kappa=0.78$) and intra-rater consistency ($r=0.82$), indicating consistent ratings across time. This was accomplished using defined protocols and trained observers. The observations were made in natural classroom settings.

Surveys and questionnaires, derived from proven instruments, demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha=0.78-0.91$) and acceptable test-retest reliability ($r=0.74-0.81$).

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

The study began with a thorough understanding of the EFL classroom dynamics to make informed decisions for improvement (Smith and Rebolledo, 2019). The exploratory phase involved careful planning to assess the current classroom situation. The action research stage, conducted over ten weeks, integrated identified themes during the exploratory phase to enhance tenth-grade learners' reading comprehension. The researchers planned, implemented, observed, evaluated, and reflected on the changes to understand their effects (Smith and Rebolledo, 2019).

The research process was conducted as follows:

1. **Plan to Explore:** In this initial step, the teachers investigated the educational situation. The researcher got to know the students and reviewed the process of teaching reading by observing and reflecting on the challenges they were facing. After that, the teacher researched the literature to plan and investigate ways to change or improve reading comprehension in the classroom.
2. **Explore:** During this phase, researchers collected data and evidence to identify frequent reading issues among learners. They accomplished this by observing them in class and utilizing an observation guide to evaluate their reading abilities. In addition, a survey was conducted to learn about students' attitudes toward reading and their perspectives on cooperative and collaborative learning. This phase aimed to answer

key exploratory questions such as How did students feel about in-class reading activities? What were students' opinions on cooperative learning? What reading materials did teachers use? What strategies did students employ for text comprehension? What were students' perceptions of their own reading comprehension? To address these questions, researchers utilized classroom observations (documented through daily, weekly, and monthly journals), questionnaires/surveys, and reflective writing by students.

3. **Analyze and reflect:** After exploring and collecting data on students' attitudes toward reading, the use of cooperative activities, and common reading challenges, the researchers examined and reflected on the findings. The findings from this study were then utilized to reflect on the observed occurrences, setting the basis for an action plan. As a result, the themes that emerged from the exploratory phase guided the necessary classroom changes to improve learners' reading comprehension. The findings from the analysis served as a foundation for reflection, which shaped the subsequent action plan.
4. **Plan to change:** Based on the themes found during the exploratory phase, the researchers created an action plan outlining the methods and activities that would be employed to improve learners' reading comprehension. During the action phase, the teacher would implement activities and lesson plans that were specific to the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) strategy. Additionally, before implementing the CIRC technique, learners took a Cambridge A2 reading exam to assess their reading skills.
5. **Act:** During this phase, the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) strategy was implemented in classroom activities. This represented the principal implementation of the action research study, which lasted ten weeks.
6. **Observe:** Throughout this step, the researchers gathered data on what happened throughout the implementation of the CIRC strategy. In the final week of the intervention, students took another Cambridge A2 reading exam to assess changes in their reading comprehension. In addition, a questionnaire was distributed to students to gather their perceptions of the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique. Both the pre- and post-tests, as well as the questionnaire, aimed to assess whether learners improved their reading comprehension skills, specifically in areas such as identifying the main idea, finding implicit and explicit information, understanding word references, and determining the meaning of words based on context.
7. **Reflect:** In this final phase, the researchers analyzed, evaluated, and reflected on the findings of the observation tools, questionnaires, and pre- and post-intervention reading tests. This detailed analysis enabled them to formulate the study's findings. Finally, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of implementing the CIRC technique to improve learners' reading comprehension.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CIRC INTERVENTION

The CIRC intervention involved introducing new vocabulary, group work, role assignments, silent reading, group discussion, summarization, and summary presentation to the class. Reading texts on topics like hobbies, technology, and health were chosen based on learner preferences and adapted for the CIRC technique.

While applying the CIRC technique, students worked in small groups with specific roles and responsibilities: Captain, Investigator, Recorder, and Checker (Sanita, 2019). The Captain led the reading and discussion, while the Investigator found answers within

the text. The Recorder documented the group's responses, and the Checker verified these responses and provided feedback.

Since Ecuadorian public schools only offer three hours of English instruction per week, the researchers implemented the CIRC technique on Mondays for ten weeks, from March 20th to June 5th, 2023. Each session lasted 80 minutes.

DATA ANALYSIS

Before applying the CIRC technique, students took a diagnostic test to assess their reading ability. After implementing the technique, a summative assessment evaluated their reading competence. Scores from both tests, originally out of thirty points, were converted to a ten-point scale using the cross-multiplication method. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, minimum and maximum scores, and standard deviations from both tests, were utilized to determine the impact of the technique on the reading comprehension abilities of tenth-grade learners.

The students' written reflections were analyzed by transcribing, coding, and categorizing their responses to understand their perspectives on English classes before and after the CIRC intervention. The qualitative analysis followed an inductive process, organizing information into codes, themes, and categories to identify patterns and explain the central issue (Fernández and Baptista, 2013; Smith and Rebolledo, 2019). The data was systematically arranged and presented using charts and graphs for better comprehension.

RESULTS

The present Exploratory Action Research (EAR) study sought to establish how EFL learners' reading comprehension can be improved by using the Cooperative Integrated Reading and composition (CIRC) technique. The qualitative and quantitative instruments provided information to answer the two following research questions:

1. What are the differences in learners' reading comprehension skills before and after implementing the CIRC technique?
2. What are learners' perceptions and thoughts towards English classes before and after implementing the CIRC technique?

LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIRC INTERVENTION

The diagnostic exam administered at the beginning of the present study showed that most learners had beginner English reading skills with a mean score of 4.79 (out of 10) and a standard deviation of 1.08, as it can be seen in Table 1. Out of 36 students, 30 (83.33%) were classified as beginners (A1), 2 (5.55%) had acceptable reading skills (A2), and 4 (11.11%) had minimal or poor reading skills (Pre-A1) and struggled with comprehension.

After ten weeks of CIRC intervention, the summative exam showed an enhancement in most learners' English reading comprehension abilities, with a mean score of 5.81 (out of 10) and a standard deviation of 1.14, as illustrated in Table 1. The number of students with acceptable or elementary (A2) reading levels increased from two to ten, while those

with beginner (A1) levels decreased from thirty to twenty-five. The number of students with minimal (Pre-A1) reading abilities also decreased from four to one.

Table 1 Students' reading level before and after the CIRC implementation

Criteria		Before		After	
		# Students	[%]	# Students	[%]
CEFR level	Foundations (Pre-A1)	4	11.11%	1	2.77%
	Beginner (A1)	30	83.33 %	25	69.44%
	Elementary (A2)	2	5.55%	10	27.77%
	Pre Intermediate (B1)	0	-	0	-
Descriptive statistics	Mean Score	4.79		5.81	
	Standard Deviation	1.08		1.14	

Note: Differences in learners' reading comprehension skills before and after implementing the CIRC technique.

Source: Diagnostic and summative tests

Before the intervention, most students struggled with locating specific information (Part 2), understanding main ideas in longer texts (Part 3), and comprehending various kinds of texts (Part 1), but performed well in understanding vocabulary and grammatical forms (Part 4 & Part 5), as it is shown in Table 2. After the CIRC intervention, students showed significant improvement in understanding various types of texts (Part 1), grasping main ideas in longer texts (Part 3), and locating specific information (Part 2). However, their performance in understanding vocabulary and grammatical forms remained relatively the same (Part 4 & Part 5), as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Students' improvement after the CIRC intervention.

KEY reading test	Description	Diagnostic-test Mean Score	Summative test Mean Score
Part #1	Understanding various kinds of texts	4.07	6.16
Part #2	Locating specific information and understanding detail	3.61	5.08
Part #3	Understanding main ideas and some details of longer texts	4	5.61
Part #4	Understanding vocabulary words within a context	6.34	6.34
Part #5	Understanding and knowing grammatical forms	5.97	5.97
Mean Score		4.79	5.81
Standard Deviation		1.08	1.14

Note: Students' reading comprehension enhancement after the CIRC intervention.

Source: Diagnostic and summative tests

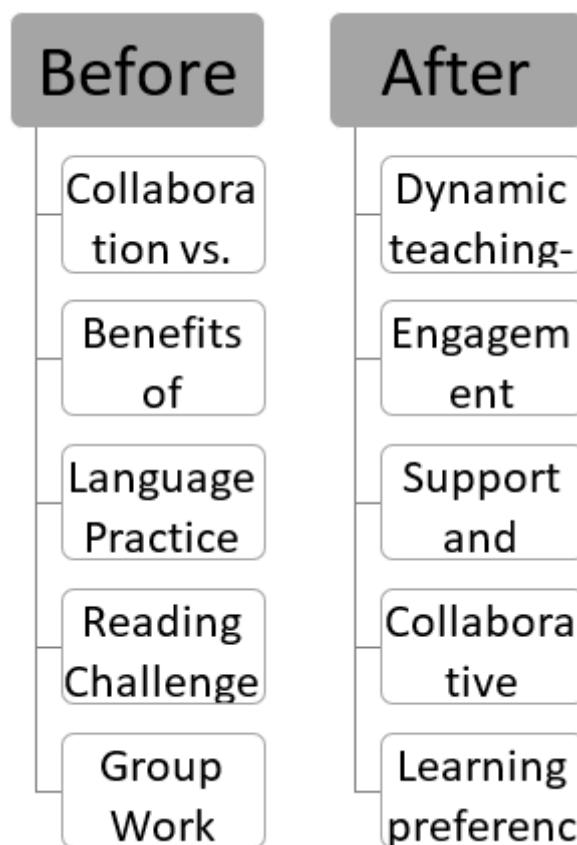
LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD ENGLISH CLASSES BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIRC INTERVENTION

Analyzing students' written reflections basically involved coding learners' responses into keywords or codes and later into categories (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Before the intervention, students' written reflections indicated that they believe collaborative work is more effective than individual work and that cooperative learning enhances class participation and eases the learning experience, as it can be seen in Figure 1. In addition, they noted a lack of cooperative learning in their classes but believed in its benefits. Students also emphasized the importance of actively using English and applying it in various activities. Most students felt they struggled with making inferences and reading critically, understanding only a small portion of texts. They suggested that working in small groups would improve their academic performance.

After ten weeks of CIRC intervention, students' perspectives toward English class changed significantly. They enjoyed dynamic activities, group work, peer support, familiar readings, and vocabulary explanations before reading, as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, feedback from tenth-grade learners indicated that engaging activities kept them interested and created a positive learning environment. Students also valued peer support, familiar readings, and vocabulary explanations, which facilitated their understanding of the texts. Additionally, some learners identified issues while implementing the CIRC technique. For instance, some tenth-grade learners indicated difficulties with uncooperative classmates, a preference for individual work, insufficient time for activities, challenges in understanding instructions, and struggles with writing summaries in English due to comprehension issues with the readings, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Learners' perceptions before and after the CIRC intervention



Note: Students' perceptions toward English classes before and after the CIRC intervention.

Source: Written reflection journals.

DISCUSSION

Data analysis after the CIRC implementation showed that the technique improved learners' reading comprehension skills. Most students found the CIRC activities helpful in understanding readings and vocabulary, enhancing comprehension. There was a notable increase in students achieving an acceptable reading level (A2) and a decrease in those at beginner (A1) and poor (Pre-A1) levels. These results support previous study findings by Hayatina and Fajrina (2018), which point out that the CIRC technique, based on cooperative learning, is more effective than traditional methods due to its supportive and collaborative environment and teacher guidance throughout the learning process.

Various research studies support the effectiveness of the CIRC technique in promoting reading comprehension. For instance, Ayu et al. (2017) and Nanda and Azmy (2020) highlight that this technique enhances skills such as identifying main ideas, locating information, making inferences, understanding references, and grasping vocabulary. Its student-centered approach fosters collaboration, reading comprehension abilities, and student engagement, improving teaching-learning processes (Nanda & Azmy, 2020). Furthermore, Umar Al Faruq et al. (2020) noted a positive correlation between the CIRC strategy and reading comprehension, indicating that a higher implementation of the CIRC strategy leads to better reading comprehension.

After implementing the CIRC technique, learners' attitudes toward English classes changed significantly. The technique enhanced collaboration, comprehension skills, and accountability. This is supported by Mahdahera and Ridwan (2023), who identified three types of engagement when using the CIRC technique: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement is demonstrated through active participation and respectful communication, while emotional engagement is marked by positive emotions during group work (Mahdahera & Ridwan, 2023). Cognitive engagement is shown by learners using different methods to complete tasks and achieve the same outcomes. Rahmasari and Swasti (2022) also noted that the CIRC technique motivates learners, making classes more enjoyable and improving focus and attention.

Although the CIRC technique offers numerous benefits, there are potential challenges associated with its use in EFL classes, such as uncooperative classmates, individual work preferences, time constraints, limited language proficiency, and difficulties in understanding instructions. Rahmasari and Swasti (2022) and Ronalto et al. (2021) highlight some drawbacks due to the variety of activities included in the CIRC technique, such as partner reading, summarization, and vocabulary and reading comprehension exercises.

According to Ronalto et al. (2021), differentiated materials that offer the same texts with varying levels of difficulty, flexible role assignments that capitalize on individual strengths beyond reading ability, and mixed-ability grouping—in which students serve as peer tutors—can all help manage students with different proficiency levels. To maintain effective guidance while preserving the collaborative spirit, teachers should also implement strategic monitoring systems with observation checklists, use graduated independence that begins with structured activities before gradually transferring responsibility to students, and set clear success criteria and rubrics for self-monitoring.

Ayu et al. (2017) also pointed out that if teachers fail to ensure fair participation in group tasks, the technique's effectiveness may be hindered. Individual practice opportunities can be balanced within the cooperative framework, according to Ayu et al. (2017), through structured individual reflection time, peer accountability systems that require specific contributions from each student, and portfolio development that records both collaborative learning and personal growth.

CONCLUSIONS

The current Exploratory Action Research study indicates that the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique significantly enhanced tenth-grade students' English reading comprehension abilities. The results from diagnostic and summative tests showed better student performance in understanding various texts, identifying main ideas, and locating specific information. Students also exhibited positive attitudes and increased motivation in their English classes, as the CIRC activities encouraged collaboration and teamwork, making classes more enjoyable and promoting responsibility. However, the technique has some challenges in EFL classes, such as the need for careful planning and coordination, potential time constraints, challenges due to varying English proficiency levels, limited individual practice opportunities, and reduced direct teacher control and guidance.

Teachers can use the core benefits of CIRC to boost reading comprehension and student motivation in EFL settings, while also building an environment in which cooperation supports individual learning. This can be accomplished by thoughtfully addressing these concerns rather than viewing them as obstacles. Thus, differentiated resources that provide the same texts at different difficulty levels, flexible role assignments that make use of students' strengths other than reading ability, and mixed-ability groups—in which students function as peer tutors—can all help manage varying skill levels. Furthermore, time constraints require controlled management through time limits, routines that reduce procedural explanations, and the use of individual homework to better prepare students and maximize classroom time.

In summary, the Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) technique, based on sociocultural theory, constructivism, and authentic literacy, promotes collaborative learning and active engagement to improve reading comprehension. It effectively enhances communication, critical thinking, academic skills, and peer interactions. Incorporating CIRC into teaching practices can increase collaboration, motivation, and academic performance, creating a more engaging learning experience for EFL students.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

William Santiago Chuquiguanga Tenesaca: Research, writing, editing, revision, creation of data collection instruments, qualitative and quantitative data collection, data analysis using software.

Genesis Milena Bravo Caguana: Research, writing, editing, revision, creation of data collection instruments, qualitative and quantitative data collection, data analysis with software.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The authors declare that there are no ethical implications.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the work presented in this article.

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