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THE POWER OF CHILDREN'S DIALOGUE  
TAIWANESE STUDENTS' PEER-LED LITERATURE DISCUSSION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

This study built on previous research in the area of peer-led literature discussion. Even though there are numerous studies investigating this type of literacy activity, little is known about Taiwanese elementary students' participation in peer-led literature discussion. This study explored a group of six Taiwanese fourth graders' participation in peer-led literature discussion in an out-of-classroom context. Specifically, it examined (a) how the participants co-constructed meaning of texts, (b) how the participants interact with one another, (c) what problems the participants encountered, and (d) how the teacher-researcher facilitate the discussions.

The study was conducted in the Shuang-Cheng Elementary school, Xindian, New Taipei City, Taiwan. Qualitative research method was adopted. Since this study attempted to explore and understand the reality of literature discussion led by the participants, data collection primarily focused on the participants' conversation and interactions. Data sources included the researcher logs, the videotaped literature discussions, the participants' notes, and the interviews with the participants. The data collection took place during an eighteen-week period.

The participants entered this study with no prior experience with student-led literature discussion. Also, they were accustomed to obeying commands from people in positions of authority and seldom had opportunities to express their ideas in class. Findings of this study suggest that with preparatory instruction and the researcher's facilitation, the participants were able to manage their discussions in which communication and interaction skills were needed, to resolve problems collaboratively with a variety of sources, and to apply reading comprehension strategies to interpret the selected texts. In the process of meaning negotiation, they shared different ways of thinking, listened to views of others, valued ideas different from their own, advocated their own beliefs, and showed an understanding of others' perspectives. Within this

discussion group, reading became a purposeful meaning-constructing activity in which they developed multiple interpretations, mediated understanding of social issues, and promoted reasoning skills.

Even though peer-led literature discussion provided the participants with opportunities to express themselves and required them to take more responsibility for their own learning. Nevertheless, this study suggests that the participants face some challenges when moving from a teacher-directed structure to a more student-centered learning context. The transition to a student-directed discussion format is not easy. The study reported here offers a look at how I, as a facilitator, prepared the participants for the discussions and what continual support I offered when they operated their own discussions.

*Dedicated to my parents*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In past decades, researchers started to question the effectiveness of traditional teacher-centered pedagogy in language arts classrooms because of a shift towards the social constructivist theory of learning (Henley, 2001). They have reported that in teacher-centered classrooms, teachers tend to do most of the talking (Almasi, 1995; Cazden, 2001). Teachers usually ask text-based questions, nominate students to answer, and then evaluate their answers (Cazden, 1988). In such a learning environment, students are expected to reproduce information or knowledge. In other words, they play a passive role in learning (McMahon & Goatley, 1995). Numerous language arts educators, in recent years, have adopted interactive learning approaches that place an emphasis on student participation to promote students' literacy proficiency, equip them with the ability to think deeply and critically, and deepen text comprehension through peer collaboration. A body of research has reported that students benefit from interactive learning approaches in language arts classrooms; however, such types of approaches are still seldom employed by Chinese instructors in Taiwanese schools since both teachers and students have long been used to teaching and learning through a skills-based approach.

In recent years, the Taiwanese government has become aware of the importance of collaboration, critical thinking, and communication strategies that citizens should learn in order to live and work in a global society. The officers of the Ministry of Education in Taiwan indicated that the goals of education are to help students develop sound personality, democratic maturity, the ability to think critically and independently, and to understand the concept of the rule of law. They emphasized that teachers need to design instruction which allows students to obtain the required skills such as negotiation and critical thinking to participate in the global

society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They expect students to act as knowledgeable, creative, and critical participants in various groups. However, in Taiwanese elementary schools, most Chinese teachers still put a primary emphasis on building vocabulary and basic comprehension skills to help their students perform well on standardized tests and to demonstrate basic skills related to reading and writing in order to advance to upper reading levels (Chu, 2007). Most of the classroom talk is performed by the teacher. Meaningful talk among students seldom happens. In December 2009, I observed a third-grade classroom in a Taiwanese elementary school for three weeks. The discourse below was a segment of the interaction between the teacher and his students in a Chinese class.

1. T: Zhong-Ming, how did Taiwanese aboriginal people get food in the past?
2. S1: They hunted and grew vegetable. They did not get food from supermarkets.
3. T: Right. Zi-Ling, tell us how Taiwanese aboriginal people cooked in the past?
4. S2: They put a pot above a stove and then burnt coal under the stove. They did not use gas.
5. T: Good. Jia-Xin, why do they worship before cultivation?
6. S3: Pray for rich harvest.
7. T: Why do they slaughter some pigs before worship?
8. S4: As sacrifices to God.
9. T: Great. Dao-Sheng, can you write “宰殺” (means slaughter) on the board?
10. S5: (He went to the board and picked up a piece of chalk. For a while, he turned his head to the teacher.) I do not know how to write “宰殺”.
11. T: These two words were taught yesterday. You should work harder. Go back to your seat. Who can write “宰殺”?

(Some students raised their hands.)

In the above conversation, the teacher asked text-based questions and then nominated students to answer questions. The teacher aimed to make sure that his students had acquired knowledge from the text. In this classroom, open-ended questions which prompted students to think deeply and critically were seldom asked. Also, the teacher controlled speaking rights. He nominated a student to answer a question and regained the floor after the student answered. Opportunities for his students to express their thoughts about the text or interact with their peers were scarce. Such traditional teacher-centered pedagogy prevails in Chinese classrooms (Chu, 2007). Most Chinese teachers' priority is to ensure that students have obtained knowledge or information that has been passed on. Helping students develop critical thinking skills as well as good communication strategies through instruction seems not to be the concern of these teachers. The emphasis is less on students' extended thoughts or ideas and more on helping students pass standardized tests; thus these teachers' instruction is composed of mainly drill. It is common to see students copying complicated Chinese characters many times and memorizing the content of textbooks. These practices may allow students to have great achievement on standardized tests; however, they do not aid students in building higher-order thinking and collaboration or communication skills (Chu, 2007).

The pedagogy described above enables students to master certain language and literacy skills, but students only accumulate knowledge without extended thought or understanding of the deeper aspects of the text. This pedagogy reflects Rosenblatt's (1995) claim that students take an efferent stance since they only take away information from texts and ignore aesthetic readings that encourage them to respond to texts based on their personal experiences. In this type of classroom, students' interpretations of texts are often neglected. As a result, what Eeds and Wells (1989) called "grand conversations" are rarely heard. Also, students are placed in a passive

stance for learning because they have few opportunities to interact with their peers during learning processes and to decide what they want to learn.

Taiwanese society is composed of a value system of Confucianism. A hierarchical governing system is central to Confucian society and this system consists of dominance-obedience relationships (Kim-Goh, 1995). Such relationships are seldom questioned because harmonious relationships and obedience to authority continue to be stressed in Confucian society. In schools, there is no doubt that teachers play the role of authority. Challenging teachers' authority is viewed as an offensive act (Jeong, 2000; as cited in Dong et al., 2008). In the Confucian tradition, learning mainly centers on accumulating knowledge rather than generating and evaluating ideas. In such a learning environment, Taiwanese students passively receive knowledge and information that teachers inculcate. They have few opportunities to question or evaluate their teachers' or peers' ideas and to extend their own thoughts. In other words, Taiwanese students lack opportunities to think critically and deeply in classrooms.

According to Nichols (2006), in order to develop the ability to talk purposefully with others and think critically, students need a learning environment in which they are allowed to initiate their own problems and questions, explore possibilities, express ideas, and construct meaning with their peers. Also, Bouton and Garth (1983) indicated that to truly learn something, students should make sense of it by actively constructing knowledge. Learning occurs when students make sense of something that is personally meaningful. Numerous researchers have suggested that language arts teachers can employ student-led literature discussion groups such as book clubs and literature circles, to enhance students' literacy abilities and to offer students opportunities to talk purposefully and think deeply (e.g., Eeds & Wells, 1989; McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Student-led literature discussion is a collaborative, discovery-oriented

instructional activity in which students are encouraged to use purposeful talk as a means to construct and negotiate meanings with their peers. Students construct the meaning of text on the basis of their previous experiences and enrich their understandings through meaningful talk. Peterson and Eeds (1990) adopted a term “grand conversations” to depict the essence of literature discussion groups. They argued that when students participate in well-operated literature discussion groups, their social skills as well as academic learning can be promoted. Gilles (1990) purported that when talking about a piece of literature with peers, students learn to negotiate meaning, clarify messages, and respond to texts more deeply. Moreover, Harste, Short and Burke (1988) claimed that by discussing literature with others, students learn to think more critically and deeply. Even though some researchers argued that student-led literature discussion could be detrimental to certain students (e.g., Allen, Moller, & Stroup, 2003), a number of studies have suggested that peer discussion of literature has potential positive influences on student collaboration and social interactions. It produces affective, cognitive, and social benefits for students (e.g., Eeds & Wells, 1989; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Kong & Fitch, 2003).

Many studies on peer-led literature discussion have been conducted in elementary and middle schools in the United States. Some Taiwanese researchers also have investigated this type of literacy activity; most of these studies were conducted in Taiwanese middle schools or colleges in EFL (English as Foreign Language) classrooms (i.e., Chou, 1999; Hsu, 2006; Su, 2009). For instance, Chou (1999) documented five Taiwanese 8<sup>th</sup> graders’ speaking and writing in English in response to English literature. Also, in her study, Su (2009) investigated 71 college students’ attitudes toward the literature-based discussion activity and their achievement in a Western Literature course. These researchers attempted to examine the development of participants’ English proficiency and attitudes toward learning English. The findings of these

studies suggested that literature discussion groups improved the participants' speaking and writing in English, increased their interest in reading English literature, and changed their perspectives on learning English. However, there is a lack of research on the discussion of Chinese literature led by Taiwanese elementary students. As aforementioned, most Chinese instruction in Taiwanese elementary schools is lecture-oriented and test-driven. There are few interactions among students and their peers in Chinese class. The lack of peer interaction during language learning processes decreases students' interest in learning (Su, 2009). Finding more about the talk of Taiwanese elementary students in peer-led literature discussion may allow Chinese instructors to consider an alternative pedagogy with which to increase students' interest in reading and to promote higher level thinking and literacy skills. Furthermore, a number of studies have reported the success of student-led literature discussion groups in a classroom environment. Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies on student-led literature discussion in out-of-classroom learning contexts. According to Vygotsky (1978), teaching involves on-the-spot assistance. The teacher should consider how to best promote students' learning in instructional activities in which they are engaged. However, opportunities for the teacher to closely observe each student's ongoing performance and offer instant support for students in need of help are not often available in a large classroom. In this study, the researcher worked with a small group of students in an out-of-classroom learning environment, which allowed the researcher to closely observe each participant's ongoing performance in discussions and offer her/him instant, effective scaffolding. This study offers Chinese instructors some suggestions about what support can be provided when students operate their own discussions of literature.

To summarize, talk is one of the significant means for learning in classrooms (Cazden, 2001). To make real learning occur, teachers have to create instruction in which students are able

to have constructive talk. Peer-led literature discussion encourages students to explore ideas and construct meaning together. It fosters students' particular capacities such as negotiation skills in ways not available in teacher-led, whole-class discussion (Barnes, 1990). In addition, it helps students develop higher level language skills, makes them aware of cultural differences, and offers them opportunities to make connections between texts and personal experiences. In Taiwanese elementary schools, most Chinese instruction emphasizes acquiring basic language skills. A hierarchical governing system in schools makes Taiwanese students passively receive knowledge that teachers pass on. Opportunities for them to actively construct new knowledge with peers, share responses to texts, and question and evaluate others' ideas are limited. Chinese instructors need alternative pedagogy that allows students to have more chance to interact with their peers in learning processes and to build the ability to think critically and independently.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Vygotskian Social Constructivist Theory of Learning**

The effect of learning environments on a person's cognitive development has been explored by social constructivist theorists. Social constructivism emphasizes that meaning is generated collectively and shaped through social processes. Among social constructivist theorists, Vygotsky is the most influential (Au, 1998). A central concept in Vygotsky's learning theory is that an individual's higher mental functions originate from social life (Wertsch, 1991); to understand one's cognitive development processes, it is necessary to examine the social environment in which development occurs (Tudge, 1990). Therefore, I used a Vygotskian social constructivist theory of learning to guide my study since I was interested in how the social context created by a student-led literature discussion group affects students' learning.

According to Wertsch (1991), there are two main ideas in Vygotskian social constructivist learning theory: Learning takes place through social interactions with more capable others and sign systems mediate one's higher mental functions. Learning is a social process (Wertsch, 1985). Students' cognitive development can be promoted through social interactions and dialogues with more capable individuals who provide support within specific social and cultural contexts. Children gradually internalize knowledge and skills obtained through these social interactions. Internalization, as defined by Vygotsky, is "when the more complicated forms of mental thinking consist of the process of using signs to pass knowledge from external social interactions to mental thought" (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 9). To make learning occur, instruction for a learner should start with the learner's interpsychological level (between people) and then gradually move the learner to the intrapsychological level (inside the learner).

The key to Vygotsky's perspective on learning is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which refers to the space between the best a child can do on his/her own and the maximum a child can do with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978). "The ZPD is that area in which children can achieve a goal with the support of a more capable other" (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 60). Vygotsky deemed that a child's cognitive development is a result of social interaction. To help a child learn more effectively, adults should provide scaffolding that aims at the child's ZPD. As Forman and Cazden (1985) noted, a child can move to a higher level of mental functioning as interactions with more knowledgeable people occur in the child's ZPD. In his writings, Vygotsky did not adopt the term "scaffolding." Stone (1993) noted that the metaphor of scaffolding was first employed by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). They used this term to depict aid and guidance provided by more competent individuals who lead less capable others from

their current level of learning to what can be achieved through assisted performance. Wood et al. (1976) stated, “Scaffolding consists essentially of the adult controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (p. 90). They further suggested six strategies for scaffolding learners: generate their interest and keep their motivation, reduce the degrees of freedom, mark critical task features, demonstrate or model solutions to a task, control frustration, and maintain goal direction.

There are abundant earlier studies on scaffolding, which place an emphasis on the adult’s role; however, Vygotsky (1978) claimed that “a child can move to a more advanced cognitive level through social interactions with more competent peers” (p. 86). In his view, children can expand their understanding when solving problems with more capable peers collaboratively. In their study, Forman and Cazden (1985) investigated how social interactions among children benefited their learning. The findings suggested that the process of interpsychological to intrapsychological rule in adult-child interactions happened in collaborative contexts among peers as well. Through peer interaction, children can know what their peers have already understood. Less capable students therefore can ask for help from their peers who have obtained particular knowledge. Jennings and Di (1996) pointed out that in mixed-ability groups, less capable children have more opportunities to interact with more capable peers and to acquire assistance from them. However, some researchers consider that students can learn with and from *all* their peers, not more capable ones only (Moller, 2004/2005; Wells, 2000). Wells (2000) asserted that the ZPD should not be confined to novice-expert interaction. He considered that learners can learn from others with little expertise as well as from those with greater experience.

To summarize, children will learn better in social environments. It is through social interactions with more capable adults or peers that children move to a higher degree of potential development. In Vygotsky's view, social interaction in the form of purposeful talk plays a crucial role in children's cognitive development. Learners achieve their potential development with the assistance of more knowledgeable people who facilitate their learning through instruction that aims at their ZPD. Both peer collaboration and adult scaffolding can promote children's cognitive development. Scaffolding and modification are important elements for fostering students' intellectual development and problem-solving skills during learning processes.

### **The Purpose of Study**

The study aimed to explore, interpret, understand, and describe the interaction and conversation of a group of six Taiwanese fourth graders who participated in peer-led literature discussions in an out-of-classroom context. The study was conducted in the Shuang-Cheng (pseudonym) Elementary School, Xindian, New Taipei City, Taiwan. The study paid particular attention to how the participants co-constructed meaning of texts, how they interacted with one another, what problems they encountered, and what support was offered by the researcher during the discussions. Reporting what I observed in a student-led literature discussion group provided opportunities for reflection about such literacy practice and its application to Chinese instruction in Taiwanese elementary schools. The following questions guided my study:

1. What are features of the participants' literature discussions?
2. How do the participants interact with one another during the student-led literature discussions?
3. What problems emerge during the student-led literature discussions?
4. How does the researcher facilitate the participants' discussions?

## **Potential Significance**

In this study, I examined six Taiwanese students' talk and interactions in a peer-led literature discussion group. Since most Chinese instructors still adopt traditional pedagogy, I hope they will benefit from a documented account of how the teacher-researcher facilitated a group of six students to run their own literature discussions, and then apply this information to their own teaching. The study can contribute in the following ways. First, the participants had no previous experience of operating student-led literature discussion on their own. The study documented what preparatory instruction the teacher-researcher provided for the participants and how she facilitated the participants' discussions. This may allow Chinese instructors who want to adopt a student-directed style of literature discussion to know what preparatory work they should do as well as what assistance they can offer when students run their discussions. Second, the participants had been learning in a teacher-centered classroom for four years and had few opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers in class. The study documented what problems emerged when the participants learned in a context in which they had more autonomy and responsibility for learning. The findings allow Chinese instructors who want to implement peer-led literature discussion in their classrooms to foresee what difficulties their students may encounter and to consider possible solutions. Third, the teacher-researcher worked with a group of six students in an out-of-classroom learning environment. This allowed the teacher-researcher not only to closely observe each student's ongoing performance but also to offer students instant, effective support based on individual needs. The study may offer other teachers some suggestions about what scaffolding strategies can be provided when students operate literature discussions on their own.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Student-led literature discussion groups have been regarded as a forum in which students can freely express their opinions and listen to peers' voices (Evans, 1996). This type of literature discussion enables students to improve their literacy capacities (Raphael & Au, 1996) as well as to foster communication and social skills (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). In contrast with the traditional, teacher-led discussion format, often featured by the IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) discourse pattern (Cazden, 2001), student-led literature discussion groups provide students with more opportunities for grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989) and meaningful discussions (Evans, 2001). The approaches of student-led literature discussion groups are various, such as Book Club (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002), and Literature Study Circles (Samway & Whang, 1996). Even though each approach has its distinctive features and goals, these approaches all encourage students to express themselves verbally (Bershon, 1992). In this chapter, I first review literature about classroom discourse in traditional classrooms and student-led literature discussion. The review attempts to support the idea that meaningful conversation and peer interaction in student-led discussions of literature are a potential means to promote students' learning. Following these reviews, reading comprehension strategies and discourse analysis are described.

### **Classroom Discourse**

#### **IRE Discursive Routine**

Barnes (1990) asserted that learning occurs through meaningful talk. However, constructive discourse in the classroom is rare. Cazden (2001) claimed that the I-R-E discourse pattern (the teacher initiates a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the

response) occurs in conventional classrooms frequently and that this pattern hinders students from extending their thoughts. Barnes (1990) pointed out that transmission pedagogy is a prevalent form of instruction. The teacher who adopts this pedagogy disseminates information or knowledge that s/he considers important and asks more closed-ended questions, which prevent students from higher-order thinking. Barnes deemed that this pedagogy may make students believe that school knowledge is “authoritative and the property of experts” (p. 80). Furthermore, Barnes and Todd (1995) indicated that in the traditional classroom, much teacher talk aims to check whether students have acquired knowledge that has been passed on. Instead of thinking aloud, students think hard to produce accurate answers to satisfy the teacher, which is called “right answerism” (Barnes & Todd, 1995, p. 14). Students are expected to reproduce information but not to think for themselves. In her study, Almasi (1995) reported that in the teacher-centered classroom, discourse mainly consists of great amounts of teacher’s long questions and students’ brief replies. Teacher-directed discussions are more like question-answer sessions but not open discussions (Potenza-Radis, 2008). They foster teachers’ interpretive authority and silence students’ voices (Cazden, 2001). Students in teacher-centered classrooms play a role of passive learner, waiting for their teachers’ direction.

### **Changes in Patterns of Classroom Discourse**

Cazden (2001) suggested that in order to make real learning occur, the teacher should offer students more right to speak. Cazden defined speaking rights as the ways in which students get the floor to speak. In a traditional classroom, the teacher has the right to speak to anyone at any time. By contrast, students have to raise hands and wait for teacher nomination when they have something to say. In other words, the teacher controls speaking rights. Cazden indicated that “instead of preallocation of turns by the teacher, there is more local management of turn-

taking by individual students at the moment of speaking” (p. 83). Allowing “self-selection of student speakers” (p. 83) is more likely to contribute to eagerness to participate in classroom discussion. To promote meaningful talk, teachers should also consider how they ask students questions. Dillon (1983) claimed that the teacher’s questions decide whether effective discussion can be achieved. As aforementioned, in a conventional classroom, the teacher asks more test questions, which merely forces students to reproduce information from the teacher but not to help them think more critically and deeply. Dillon (1983) suggested some alternative question formats: (a) using reflective statements; (b) adopting declarative statements; and (c) inviting students to clarify or elaborate arguments. Moreover, Barnes, Todd and Torbe (1990) pointed out what elements should be involved in classroom conversation to promote meaningful talk. They stated, “Teaching is a highly skilled activity that requires from the teacher an immediate response to events as they develop. The teacher must judge instantly whether the moment requires a suggestion, an invitation to explain, a discouraging glance, or a new task” (p. 8).

### **Student-Led Literature Discussion**

To promote students’ deeper understanding of text and higher-level thinking, a teacher needs to create instruction which allows students to extend their thoughts. Some researchers considered student-led literature discussion to be one of the potential instructional activities in which students have more opportunities for meaningful talk as well as have more responsibility for their learning (e.g., Almasi, 1995; Au & Mazon, 1981; Cazden, 2001; Eeds & Peterson, 1997). Barnes and Todd (1995) contended that small-group discussion enables students to promote their learning in ways not available in teacher-directed talk. Also, Maloch (2000) stated that student-led literature discussion is a classroom participation structure that contrasts with the IRE pattern.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Student-Led Literature Discussion**

**Social constructivist learning.** Learning is an actively constructive process (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). True learning does not take place if learners merely swallow what is transmitted from teachers. Knowledge is constructed through social interaction. It is through constructive conversations that learners acquire knowledge. As Cunningham (1992) stated, without previous experiences and interactions with people, individuals cannot transfer knowledge from the external world into their memories. They should take an active role in constructing knowledge and understanding through making connections as well as developing new understanding from previously learned knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) stated that “passive student is the greatest sin from a scientific of view, since it relies on the false principle that the teacher is everything and the pupil is nothing” (p. 165).

According to Vygotsky (1978), thinking is the result of social dialogue that has been internalized. He held that learning is a social process that occurs when learners interact with more capable individuals who offer them guidance or assistance. With such interactions, learners can advance to a higher level of development. In Barnes and Todd’s discussion of Vygotsky (1995), they stated that learners use language to communicate with others and to check and confirm their thoughts. New models of mental functioning are gradually established through this process. The ways that learners interact with others influence their cognitive development. Some other researchers have also proposed the idea that an individual’s cognitive development is promoted by interacting with others (e.g., Green & Wallat, 1981). For example, Horowitz (1994) maintained that “authentic talk about the self and world in a social context is central to learning and cognition” (p. 533). Also, Barnes (1992) deemed that discussion involves elaboration and

clarification. The processes of clarifying arguments or elaborating thoughts enable individuals to produce new insights.

With regard to the type of scaffolding, Stone (1993) claimed that one's mental capacities can be developed and enhanced through semiotic interaction such as conversations between an expert and a novice, along with written notes. He further indicated that semiotic scaffolding can be provided through verbal or nonverbal formats during interactive problem-solving processes. Stone adopted the term "prolepsis" to represent communicative mechanisms involved in the process of semiotic interaction. According to Rommetveit (1979), prolepsis refers to "a communicative move in which the speaker presupposes some as yet unprovided information" (p. 171). Such presupposition creates challenges which force the learner to build a set of assumptions to understand utterances (Rommetveit, 1979) as well as to draw the learner into a new model of the problem which is more complicated but understandable when s/he links the problem to what s/he already knows (Stone, 1993). Palincsar (1986) stressed that dialogue between the expert and the learner plays a crucial role during scaffolding. It serves to help the learner develop cognitive strategies. Stone stated that in order to accurately interpret the expert's utterances, the learner should know the context presupposed by the expert. "If too much common ground is incorrectly presupposed, the message does not go through" (Stone, 1993, p. 174). In other words, effective scaffolding involves the construction of shared contexts. In addition to verbal communicative formats, semiotic scaffolding also can be offered through nonverbal manners, such as modeled behaviors. The learner fosters his/her mental capacities by observation.

Regarding the means of scaffolding, Vygotsky considered that using cultural tools can foster a child's cognitive development. In his view, social exposure to various cultures expands a

child's pool of knowledge. The more experiences a child has, the richer his/her world becomes. Several scholars have also suggested that educators can utilize learners' rich cultural resources to scaffold their learning (e.g., Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 1999/2000; Moll & Greenberg, 1990). Moll and Greenberg (1990) contended that students' *funds of knowledge* are important as useful scaffolding tools. In their view, *zones of possibility* are areas in which students' funds of knowledge, such as home cultures, community experiences, and skills they learn outside of school, are valued and utilized to help students better understand school knowledge. In their study, Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (1999/2000) reported that English speaking learners were engaged in peer-led literature discussions when their own cultures were integrated into the classroom. Another study by Miller (2003) detailed how low socio-economic African American students integrated their rich home literacies into mainstream models of literacy. She found that the participating students had the ability to challenge the responses of their middle class counterparts, to critically analyze culturally relevant texts, and to create opportunities for their voices to be heard. In addition to students' funds of knowledge, Gallimore and Tharp (1990) proposed using adult-child responsive interactions as scaffolding. They suggested that adults adopt six responsive means when teaching children: giving feedback, instruction, modeling, questioning, cognitive structuring, and contingency managing. Goldenberg's (1993) study echoed Gallimore and Tharp's work. Goldenberg investigated teacher-student verbal interactions with a fourth-grade teacher and her students in a bilingual education program. He discovered that the students were able to deepen their thoughts when the teacher responded to their contributions and questioned their arguments.

In Vygotsky's view, learners' cognitive development is impacted by social interactions with more knowledgeable people. In most cases, these more knowledgeable people are adults.

When adults function as more knowledgeable others, they support children to accomplish tasks that children cannot do on their own. In classrooms, teachers guide students to construct knowledge through semiotic interactions. The concept of adult scaffolding is the theoretical foundation of student-led literature discussion models. For instance, McMahon and Raphael's (1997) model of literature discussion group—Book Club—emphasizes that teachers need to elaborate and model how to use reading comprehension strategies. McMahon and Raphael stated that students cannot become good readers if their teachers only tell them about reading comprehension strategies while neglecting to provide concrete models of how to make appropriate use of these strategies. When students learn to use reading strategies, teachers play the role of facilitator, offering assistance for their students until they can apply these strategies without difficulty. In addition, Daniel's (2002) model of literature discussion group—Literature Circles—emphasizes that the teacher needs to model and coach literature discussion before students can operate well on their own. The teacher serves as a facilitator and a supporter in students' discussions (Daniels, 2002). The teacher can provide initial support for students with written and verbal forms. That is, the teacher models the discussion process and details the responsibilities of each discussion role with role sheets.

Scaffolding can be offered not only by adults but also by peers. Goatley, Brock, and Raphael (1995) claimed that given shared cultural and social backgrounds, children may become more knowledgeable others in learning contexts. Also, Jennings and Di (1996) indicated that a child's cognitive development can be promoted through interactions with other members of his/her culture. In their study, Former and Cazden (1985) examined the potential benefits of the social interactions taking place among children. They discovered that when one child performed the task procedures, his/her peers could act as assistants, offering guidance and correcting

mistakes. Student-led literature discussion groups were based on the concept of peer collaboration. For example, McMahon and Raphael (1997) indicated book clubs attempt to involve students in meaningful conversations. They are forums in which students can share their personal responses to given texts, listen to their peers' ideas and opinions, and discuss a variety of social issues as well as problems represented in texts. Such collaborative group work enables students to become more knowledgeable. In addition, Daniels (2002) pointed out that in Literature Circles, students freely express their thinking and feelings and exchange their ideas rather than explicitly analyze literary components. Through such open, natural conversations, students can discover big ideas from texts and become independent readers. A number of researchers (e.g., Almasi, & Gambrell, 1997; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Wells, & Chang-Wells, 1992) have examined student-led literature discussion groups with a focus on peer interactions during discussions. Some researchers have reported that this type of instructional activity allows students who lacked comprehension of texts to seek help from their peers. For example, a study by McMahon and Goatley (2001) detailed how fifth graders who had more experiences in directing book clubs supported those with no experience. Through a 4-week-long close observation, the researchers found that the participants needed teacher scaffolding and peer assistance to perform new roles and meet expectations of book clubs. Nevertheless, not all peer interactions have positive effects. Some researchers have found that peer interactions may result in harmful effects. For instance, a study by Alvermann (1995/1996) examined interactions among boys and girls in a literature discussion group. Alvermann reported that the girls in the group were often interrupted by the boys. The boys' interruptions attempted to take away the speaker's power as well as caused asymmetrical communication patterns. More detailed

information about negative effects of peer interaction in literature discussion will be offered in the section in which problems of literature discussion are discussed.

**Reader response theory.** The central concept of literature discussion is that readers create meaning about texts through sharing thoughts and ideas with others (Lohfink, 2006). Literature-discussion-based teaching is a student response-centered approach by which the teacher facilitates students to run their own discussions about texts. Students in discussions continuously construct the meaning of texts and connect their experiences to texts. According to Cox and Zarillo (1993), this approach is based on reader response theory. Reader response theorists regard reading as a dynamic process in which a reader is continuously reflecting on his/her responses to the text. One of the key concepts of reader response theory is that a reader's particular construction of meaning is the result of his/her unique transaction with the text. Factors such as reader attitude and cultural background all affect how a reader interprets texts.

Among literature response theorists, Louise Rosenblatt is notable. She first introduced the transactional theory of reading in the late 1930s to contradict behaviorists' view that regarded the reading process as a simple stimulus and to criticize the New Criticism belief that which holds that meaning resides in the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). She advocated an integrated relationship between the text and the reader. She indicated that "reading is a transaction, involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Based on the writings of pragmatic philosophers, Rosenblatt employed the words "interaction," "interactional," "transaction," and "transactional" to represent the fundamental concept of her theory (Mills & Stephens, 2004). For Rosenblatt, the reading process is a transaction that is generated between the reader and the text. It is through the dynamic interplay between the reader, the text, and the context through which the reader makes his/her unique interpretation of

text. Meaning occurs “during the transaction between the reader and the signs on the page” (Rosenblatt, 1995, *xvi*).

According to Cai (2001), Rosenblatt’s transaction theory is a theory of response to literature but not a theory of teaching reading. Rosenblatt did not offer many pedagogical implications in her writings. In her work, she emphasized that reading is not merely decoding messages. Readers have to “transform those messages into a set of meaningful symbols” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 24). The power of text drives from readers’ interpretations, reflections, and critiques. Meaning is constructed by the reader’s personal interaction with the text. For Rosenblatt, readers construct meaning, but not take meaning from texts. She stated, “The meaning does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during transaction between the reader and the text” (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 4). Readers utilize their culture, past experiences, personalities, memories, preoccupations, and assumptions to interpret a text. Rosenblatt maintained that there is no single, accurate way of interpreting texts. Readers’ interpretations of the same text can be totally different. Also, at different times, the same reader may have different responses to the same text.

Another key concept emphasized in Rosenblatt’s transaction theory is that readers take aesthetic and efferent stances to respond to texts. She regarded stance as a reader’s readiness with which to think about what s/he is reading. Rather than take a single stance in the process of reading, readers move “back and forth along a continuum between aesthetic and efferent modes of reading” (Beach, 1993, p. 50). Any reading event can fall somewhere in between the efferent and aesthetic poles. The reader’s stance is determined by his/her purpose for reading and his/her selective attention to the specific reading task. When taking an aesthetic stance, the reader focuses primarily on feelings evoked or memories aroused by the text, rather than intends to seek

certain information or to accomplish an assigned task. According to Rosenblatt (1994), “in aesthetic reading the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (p.25). Reading creates an aesthetic appreciation for literature that results in life-long adherents. When responding to the text with an efferent stance, the reader tends to pay closer attention to knowledge and information in the text. S/he is eager to understand knowledge conveyed by the text. Rosenblatt claimed that in efferent reading, “The reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the action to be carried out” (p. 23). In her work, Rosenblatt (1985) raised a significant issue regarding efferent and aesthetic stances. She questioned whether instructional activities lead students to respond to texts primarily with an efferent stance. She criticized some language arts teachers who adopt potentially aesthetic texts for the purpose of teaching efferent reading. She asserted that how the teacher asks questions and leads discussion significantly affects what stance students would take in response to texts. Teachers should become aware of what potential roles they can be in balancing students’ efferent and aesthetic stances.

In Rosenblatt’s study (1985) on student responses to texts, she found that students’ language proficiency, literary expectations, and social assumptions significantly influenced students’ interpretation of texts. These observations were relevant to English language learners coming from different cultural backgrounds and holding different social assumptions. Rosenblatt deemed that for some limited English proficiency students, they are more likely to translate language when they are reading and thus they may naturally engage in an efferent stance. Due to their limited understanding of language, they may have difficulty in responding to texts with an

aesthetic stance. Hence, to improve students' ability to respond to text aesthetically, a teacher's assistance and guidance are needed.

The concept of student-led literature discussion is rooted in Rosenblatt's transaction theory of reading that regards reading as a transactional process by which readers construct their own meaning based on their prior experiences, emotions, perspectives, and knowledge. Based on this theory, student-led literature discussion aims to offer an opportunity for students to connect personal experiences to the text, exchange opinions, examine their own interpretations, and learn to be more tolerant of different voices. By participating in literature discussion groups, students will "develop a more critical questioning attitude and will see the need of a more reasoned foundation for their thoughts and judgments, a more consistent system of values" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 120).

### **Overview of Student-Led Literature Discussion**

Student-led literature discussion refers to a small group of students getting together to talk about a portion of text or a text they have read in a cooperative manner. Groups often meet periodically throughout the reading of a text. Group members respond to not only the text but also each other's ideas and opinions (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). In this type of discussion, students do not rely on the teacher to summarize and interpret a text. Instead, they play an active reader role to construct the meaning of a text with peers (Karolides, 1997). According to Eeds and Peterson (1997), student-led literature discussion provides students with an opportunity to share their life stories and to examine their responses. They believed that every student is a capable interpreter, being able to construct meaning based on their prior knowledge and life experiences. Instead of focusing on which interpretation is accurate, student-led literature discussion attempts to help students understand how different interpretations are made by their

peers and to know that there will be diverse interpretations. In addition, Gruhler (2004) claimed that student-led literature discussion attempts to have students share ideas and listen to one another's opinions and perspectives rather than lead to one right answer or reach an agreement among group members. By listening to different individual's perspectives, students can think from different angles about themselves, their peers, and texts.

Student-led literature discussion differs from traditional whole-class discussion in several ways. First, student-led literature discussion affords more opportunities for students to talk since each group typically consists of five to seven students (McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Second, students in the same group discuss a text or a portion of text that everyone has read. This keeps the conversation anchored (Henley, 2001). Third, both students and teachers share responsibility for discussion. They have an equal opportunity to raise questions, make comments, or share personal experiences. Some researchers have compared the effectiveness of literature discussion led by teachers and others led by students. For example, Almasi (1995) examined and compared fourth graders' sociocognitive conflicts in both teacher-led and peer-led literature discussions. There were several significant findings: In peer-led groups, students' conflicts derived from peers' questions and comments. Students were able to resolve these conflicts by exchanging opinions and knowledge with their peers. By contrast, in teacher-led groups, conflicts mainly came from teachers' questions and students resolved these conflicts by reciting factual information from the text. Compared to teacher-led groups, the students in peer-led groups expressed themselves more fully and more often explored topics of interest to them. Further, in peer-led discussion groups, more complex conversations were initiated and sustained by the students, while in teacher-led groups, the discourse involved mostly the IRE pattern.

Even though the names of literature discussion groups are various—Literature Circles (Daniels, 2002), Book Clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), literature study circles (Samway & Whang, 1996), grand conversations (Eeds & Peterson, 1997), or literature study groups (Eeds & Wells, 1989)—they all involve students in working collaboratively in small groups to articulate questions, problems, concerns, and understanding of texts. This type of literacy activity contains the transactional nature of reading (Gruhler, 2004), maintaining that the text, the reader, and the context are all significant for constructing the meaning of texts. Some approaches to student-led literature discussion groups are introduced below.

**Literature study groups.** Eeds and Wells (1989) conducted one of the earliest studies in this area—designed according to Rosenblatt’s (1995) transactional theory of reading—examining how fifth and sixth graders constructed meaning in literature study groups. This study focused on how students’ interaction influenced the way they constructed meaning. Eeds and Wells found that the students could construct varied responses when they were in charge of their own discussions and this model allowed the students to participate in “grand conversations” that contained higher-order thinking such as inferring and evaluating. The students’ responses were sorted into four categories: (a) Constructing meaning: The students were able to construct their own meaning of the text. They sometimes changed their minds or revised original ideas after hearing peers’ views; (b) Sharing personal stories invoked either by the text or the discussion: By sharing personal life experiences, the text became more relevant to the students’ lives; (c) Predicting, interpreting, and hypothesizing actively: In order to reveal meaning, the students were engaged in questioning what they were reading; and (d) Valuing and evaluating the texts. This type of talk suggested that the students had deeper engagement in reading. This

study opened the door for teachers and researchers to look at student-led discussion of literature as a space in which students could construct the meaning of texts with one another.

**Literature study circles.** Samway and Whang (1996) investigated the implementation of literature study circles with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. In her class, Whang provided her students with books for literature discussion. She chose books based on her students' interests as well as the degree to which she thought they would lend themselves to discussion. Also, she chose some less complex or shorter books for students who were still emerging as readers in English. Her students selected a new book every week or ten days. Whang brought in six to eight copies each of four or five books for her students on the day that they selected a book. After Whang briefly described each book, her students selected a book they wanted to read. Whang found that their selections were sometimes impacted by their friends' choices. Students reading the same book formed a group and decided how many pages should be completed each day in order to finish the book by the due day. They should read the entire book before getting together to discuss the book. After a few days of independent reading, a book group met for a 20- or 30-minute discussion in which each group member shared his/her responses. This discussion session often focused more on the students' personal responses to the book. Based on this discussion, an assignment was given to help the students better understand the book. The students should complete the assignment before returning to the group for the second discussion session, which centered more on an analysis of literary elements. At the end of each discussion, the group reflected on how the discussion went. By doing so, the students could evaluate their own contributions to the discussion. Samway and Whang reported that even though the students were initially reluctant to share their responses, they became more and more engaged in discussions toward the end of the year. Literature study circles gave these students an opportunity to read,

think, and discuss critical and social issues such as racism and freedom of speech. Samway and Whang suggested that shorter books with pictures could be introduced to less fluent readers or students with limited English proficiency. This would allow them to have a successful first experience. Some features in implementing successful literature study circles were underscored in this study: reading entire books, talking about books particularly in an open-ended fashion, having some choice over which books to read, and having plenty of time to read.

**Book Clubs.** In their study, Raphael and McMahon (1994) explored the implementation of Book Club, an instructional strategy of teaching literature, which is composed of reading and writing activities, book clubs (student-led literature discussion), community share (whole-class discussion), and instruction. The book clubs consisted of three to five students, mixed as to gender, ethnicity, and reading ability, who discussed ideas related to the book they were reading. Before students formed their own discussion groups, they were instructed explicitly how to participate in groups to discuss the text such as characteristics of good speakers and listeners in small groups.

According to Raphael and McMahon (1994), students usually contribute more when they feel they have something to say. The emphasis on individual work and turn-taking may impede authentic conversations about books. They believed that discussing issues and themes in a more mature way may not occur if students do not well prepared. Therefore, they suggested that students can use reading logs in which character maps, special story parts, critiques, feeling about illustrations, and author's craft are included. Raphael and McMahon found that through the use of reading logs, over time, students were able to synthesize information, take different perspectives, and present their ideas in writing. Their study underscored the importance of

integrating a variety of reading activities into language arts class because both discussion and writing tasks have been found to promote students' literacy abilities.

**Literature Circles.** Literature Circles (LC) is an instructional strategy created by Harvey Daniels and some school teachers in the 1990s. LC intends to develop an authentic, discussion-based classroom in which students can engage with literature. In Daniel's model (1994), students choose their own books. Groups for literature circles are formed by book choice and are composed of two to six students. Group members meet on a regular schedule to discuss their reading. The chunk of time for each discussion needs to be at least twenty minutes. Before groups meet, students need to write notes on role sheets to guide their reading as well as discussion. Mandatory roles suggested by Daniels (1994) include discussion director who is a facilitator, literary luminary whose job is to select passages from the reading to share with the group, connector who shares connections s/he makes between the reading and her/himself, another text, or the world, and illustrator who draws a depiction of something in the reading or something the readings inspires him/her to sketch. The purpose of taking roles is to spark or sustain open, genuine conversations about books. Group members should not take turns reading their notes on their role sheets aloud. If they do so, there will be no interaction among group members and no one will build on other members' ideas and interpretations.

Research on reading instruction has suggested that LC increases students' motivation to read by engaging them in reading groups. For instance, a study by Byrd (2002) investigated potential effectiveness of literature circles with eight adult readers. Byrd reported that the participants expressed positive attitudes toward Literature Circles since they were allowed to choose reading materials, express their own responses, and learn about others' ideas through natural discussions. The use of role sheets is one of the features of LC. Students who have little

experience of working collaboratively need some guidance for participating in collaborative group work. Role sheets that detail specific tasks for students to perform in LC are considered temporary scaffolding, acting as a springboard to open natural conversations about texts (Daniels, 2002). In her study, Chou (1999) examined the implementation of LC in an eleventh-grade English classroom in Taiwan. The findings suggested that role sheets provided tasks for students to perform in discussions so that they could be empowered to read and discuss texts.

**Collaborative Reasoning.** Collaborative Reasoning (CR) discussion is a literacy activity in which students learn to expand their responses to literature in a more logical and critical manner (Clark, Anderson, Kuo, Kim, Archodidou, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2003). It places an emphasis on understanding how students generate genuine evidence to support their arguments. In CR, after finishing a story in which a character faces a dilemma, students meet with their group members to discuss the character's dilemma and what the character can do based on information in the story. Different from other types of student-led literature discussions, in CR, it is the teacher who poses a question regarding a dilemma that a character faces. In discussions, students formulate their positions on the question, offer evidence to support their arguments, challenge one another's arguments, and respond to counterarguments. In the end, students and the teacher review the discussions. The main goal of CR is to help students develop analytical reasoning skills. As Waggoner, Chinn, Yi, and Anderson (1995) claimed, CR aims to assist students in developing the ability to think independently and critically. Similar to other types of student-led literature discussions, the teacher in CR plays a facilitator role, helping promote students' critical thinking skills, bringing together individual solutions to problems, highlighting any inconsistencies in discussion processes, providing feedback, and challenging students' arguments. In addition, to encourage students to take risks in opening up their arguments in

discussions, the teacher needs to select stories in which characters face dilemmas around critical issues such as racism, human rights, and ethnic identity (Clark et al. 2003).

### **Participating in Student-Led Literature Discussion**

**Characteristics of student-led literature discussion.** Some researchers have identified the elements of peer-led literature discussion. According to McMahon and Raphael (1997), a peer-led literature discussion typically consists of five to seven students getting together in heterogeneous groups to discuss a text or any portion of a text. Students are responsible for their own discussions and the teacher plays a role of facilitator. Gilles (1990) investigated several groups of disabled seventh graders discussing trade book literature. She found that the participants' discussions included talking about literary elements, sharing life experiences, and discussing social issues. Another study by Almasi, O'Flahavan, and Arya (2001) examined peer-led literature discussions in a fourth grade classroom. Their analysis led them to develop eight characteristics of discussion: (a) students refer to text, (b) students respond to one another, (c) students relate to personal experience, (d) students ask questions, (e) students monitor group processes, (f) students extend comments by adding on or asking questions, (g) students critically evaluate the text and author, and (h) the teacher scaffolds interaction (p. 105). Moreover, Hanssen (1990) indicated that students in literature discussion groups often "begin either by retelling the story to make sure they all understood or by asking questions to clarify their particular points of confusion or uncertainty" (p. 207). She also pointed out that a common feature of literature discussion is that discussion does not take place in any predictable sequence. "Natural conversations about books do not start at the beginning of the book and move to the end; they begin with what the participants find most interesting and meander through other parts of the book and other issues" (p. 208).

**Benefits of student-led literature discussion.** According to Spiegel (2005), enthusiasm for reading can be promoted through the use of literature discussion groups. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) considered that only natural and authentic conversations can engage students. Students' engagement increases when they participate in literacy activities that comprise discussions, responses, and open-ended questions. A study by Almasi, McKeown, and Beck (1996) detailed students' literacy engagement, focusing on the influence of the context of literacy acts and the culture of the classroom. Their findings suggest that students' engagement in reading is affected by the context and the culture of classroom. Almasi et al. (1996) stated that "engagement occurred when teachers provided an environment in which students feel free to ponder or question the text's meaning, content, character motives, text events, or author's craft" (p. 119). Student-led discussion of literature offers students opportunities to respond to one another's interpretations of a text and share their ideas in a natural manner. According to Almasi et al., this leads students to become highly engaged readers.

Some researchers have claimed that students in peer-led literature discussion groups have more ownership to control their learning through decision-making, discussion, and responses to what they read (Burns, 1998; Norton, 1991). When students are allowed to decide their own topics of discussion, they "feel a sense of accomplishment for managing their own learning, which motivates them to develop a favorable attitude toward learning" (Su, 2009, p. 23). A study by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) examined 105 fourth and fifth graders' participation in collaborative literature discussion groups. They found that students with high intrinsic motivation showed higher interest in reading texts than those with low intrinsic motivation. Peer-led literature discussion benefits students in increasing their motivation for reading since they are free to interpret texts and share their thoughts in a collaborative learning environment.

Student-led literature discussion provides teachers with a way of evaluating students that is different from traditional approaches (Eeds & Peterson, 1989). In traditional approaches, students' responses to questions are typically evaluated as either right or wrong. It is not uncommon that a student's effort is often represented by a numeric grade (Potenza-Radis, 2008). As a result, students believe that there is an accurate meaning to be found in a given text. In student-led literature discussion, evaluation is not so simple. During discussions, students have to explain their ideas and find support for their responses. In this process, students' responses may be revised, supported, or even disregarded and deeper meanings may be constructed. This allows students to recognize that there is not only one correct meaning in a text. Instead, meaning is constructed by the reader, the text, and the context (Karolides, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1995). The teacher can evaluate students' performance based on their participation and contribution in discussions and written responses (Karolides, 1997). Students' contributions in discussions enable the teacher to know what prior knowledge and experiences they have. Through observing students' performance in discussions, the teacher can assess how well students understand a particular text.

In student-led literature discussion, immediate feedback or thought-provoking questions (e.g., "What do you think would happen if...") may be given or raised by peers and this allows students to explore deeper understandings of the text and prompt them to move out of the text (LaRose, 2007). Therefore, higher-order thinking can be developed in this process. Group members may raise questions that challenge assumptions in the text. Consequently, cognitive conflicts may occur that contribute to individual growth and increase understanding (Ogle, 1983, as cited in Leal, 1993). Deeper meaning of the text may not be apparent to all students when reading alone. A study by Leal (1993) examined several fifth graders' talk in small group

literature discussions and found that the students could gently challenge their peers and create new interpretations of the text. She concluded that peer-led literature discussion offers a less threatening environment in which students' responses are not corrected by the teacher. When students realize that they are not supposed to offer correct answers, they are more likely to generate new insights with peers. Similarly, a study by Dong, Anderson, Kim, and Li (2008) described Chinese and Korean students' participation in Collaborative Reasoning (CR) discussions. They found that students were able to operate open discussions in which critical thinking was needed. CR would help Chinese and Korean students develop analytical reasoning skills.

Students from diverse cultural backgrounds bring different perspectives and social assumptions to classrooms. Peer-led literature discussion offers students not only a way of sharing experiences and exchanging ideas with peers through natural conversations but also a space in which students can be aware of multiple perspectives and learn to respect and appreciate different values that other members bring to discussion (Su, 2009). Some researchers have studied minority students in the context of student-led literature discussion. The findings from these studies suggest that minority students' cultures can be better understood and valued through such discussions. A study by Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (1999/2000) detailed how Spanish-speaking students were engaged in literature discussions with their mainstream peers. They found that these Spanish-speaking students were able to utilize their family or community culture to comprehend the text and connect their life experiences to the text. These minority students had ownership when sharing their family stories and through sharing, their culture was better understood.

**The role of the teacher.** Numerous scholars have indicated that student-led literature discussion groups create more equitable dialogue and increase exploratory talk (e.g., Barnes, 1993; Jewell & Pratt, 1999). Nonetheless, some studies have suggested that student-led discussion groups can be problematic and do not always produce meaningful conversations (e.g., Evans, 1996; Phelps & Weaver, 1999). For instance, in their study, Phelps and Weaver (1999) reported that one of the female participants became marginalized when male participants continued to interrupt her by correcting information that she was offering. Some proponents of literature discussion groups contend that the teacher should be present as a facilitator to promote quality discussions. “There is no substitute for the teacher’s presence and participation” (Eeds & Peterson, 1997, p. 57). Allen, Moller, and Stroup (2003) argued that student-led literature discussion may give students meaningful and effective experiences, but it could be detrimental to some students. Also, Maloch (2000) maintained that to minimize the possibility that some students might be marginalized, the teacher needs to be present in the group to help facilitate students’ interactions. It is important for teachers to monitor the effectiveness of the literature discussion for each student. Although literature discussions are operated by students themselves, the teacher does not release all responsibilities for their conduct (LaRose, 2007).

Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) investigated their own interactions with their students when taking part in their students’ literature discussions. These researchers/teachers found that they played four roles during the discussions: teacher as facilitator, teacher as participant, teacher as mediator, and teacher as active listener. As a facilitator, the teachers encouraged student interaction and monitored social interactions which impeded discussions. As a participant, the teachers took part in discussions by sharing personal opinions, raising questions, and making broad thematic statements. In the mediator role, the

teachers encouraged students to make connections between the book being discussed and their own life experiences. As an active listener, the teachers often spoke less but acknowledged students' statements by providing background comments such as "hmm" or "yeah".

Alvermann, Peyton-Young, Weaver, et al. (1996) claimed that teachers who implement student-led literature discussion groups in their classrooms should recognize that many unexpected things may happen frequently. Students' talk and behavior in discussions may not always be consonant with teachers' intentions. They may prefer to use their own agendas to operate discussions which are different from teachers' intentions. To allow literature discussion a chance to succeed and to value students' independence and self-directed learning, Alvermann and her colleagues provided some suggestions for teachers in order to facilitate students' discussions: (a) Offer students more opportunities to talk about what they read; (b) Create a sense of community in the classroom. Students can be more engaged in discussions when they feel comfortable with group members; (c) Attend to group dynamics. It is possible for students to freely voice themselves when group dynamics enhance mutual respect and understanding; (d) Moderate, but not dominate students' discussions. Let students run their own discussions since productive discussions are constituted by each student's personal meaning making; and (e) Have students evaluate their discussions.

Many researchers have suggested that students need more experiences with books before moving into literature discussion (e.g., Smith, 1990; Short & Armstrong, 1993). Without experience in reading books and thinking about them in depth, student-led literature discussion has few chances to succeed. Smith (1990) pointed out that teachers need to offer students more time immersing themselves in as many read-aloud and extensive reading experiences as possible before they run their own discussions of literature. Once students get a sense of enjoyment of

literature and develop a knowledge base, it can be the right time to invite them to explore literature in depth in small groups. Also, Short (1999) claimed that when students have few prior experiences with books, the teacher should increase the amount of time for reading aloud, allow time to browse books and gather students together for informal discussions before moving students into small-group literature discussions. It is the teacher's responsibility to create a context in which students' discussions have the best chance to succeed.

According to Potenza-Radis (2008), natural conversations do not always occur in peer-led literature discussion, especially when most students are firmly engrained with traditional classroom discourse. That is, the teacher simply calls on students. McMahon and Goatley (2001) indicated that even in student-led literature discussion, the IRE discourse pattern occurred frequently. This resulted from the fact that students simply imitated their teacher's classroom discourse. A series of studies has been conducted on the teacher's role when the discussion format is transmitted from a teacher-led to a student-led format. These studies attempted to examine how teachers scaffolded their students' discourse process skills when they were not familiar with the fundamental rules of group discourse. Maloch (2002) claimed that "the explication of ground rules becomes even more critical as students make the transition from more traditional formats to student-led ones" (p. 119). To promote students' participation in student-led literature discussion, the teacher needs to aid students in understanding these discussion rules. In their study, Jewell and Pratt (1999) detailed how teachers modeled student protocols for successful discussion. They demonstrated that specific teacher actions that are crucial to the success of literature discussion: restating students' opinions for clarification; strengthening discussion behaviors; helping students seek evidence for their arguments; and encouraging students to extend their original thinking. Another research by Galda, Rayburn, and

Stanzi (2000) also investigated how a teacher adopted effective strategies to promote more natural conversation in student-led literature discussion. In the beginning, students used the IRE discourse pattern to talk to their peers. To promote more natural talk, the teacher showed her students how to enter into and maintain conversations. She also encouraged her students to jump into the discussion without raising their hands. To let her students monitor their talk and behavior in discussions, an effective strategy that the teacher employed was having her students think about how they discussed the books and observe themselves on videotape. In short, to allow literature discussion to be more successful, initial explanation and preparatory activities are not adequate. The teacher needs to continuously offer students scaffolding and explicit instruction during ongoing discussions (Maloch, 2002).

Some studies have highlighted the importance of teacher support for struggling readers in literature discussion groups. A study by Moller (2004/2005) described how a struggling reader, Ashley, became a more capable peer in a literature discussion group through adult support. Moller facilitated Ashley's learning by opening spaces for her to express her responses to texts, monitoring her behavior in the group, praising her for her efforts, and helping her accomplish reading work. This study underscored the importance of the teacher's role in monitoring the quality of literature discussions and scaffolding students who might be in need of help. Moreover, Maloch (2009) conducted a case study of two African-American, third-grade students' participation across various literacy events, particularly literature discussions. Through a five-month-long close observation, Maloch discovered that the targeted participants, Antwan and Chris, resisted literacy activities which required specific academic skills that they did not have, such as writing reading logs and small-group shared reading activities. Maloch stated that both Antwan and Chris were reluctant to take part in literacy events requiring "cultural and

linguistic capital” (p. 110) they had not gained. Without such cultural and linguistic capital, Antwan and Chris had a slim chance to succeed in the events. With their teacher’s scaffolding such as re-voicing their arguments and giving encouragement, Antwan and Chris gradually acquired cultural capital and could participate appropriately in discussions.

To summarize, some preparation is needed before students operate their own literature discussions. The teacher should have sufficient quantities of books, model discussions, and clarify students’ responsibilities in discussions. When students learn how to run discussions, the teacher can gradually release leadership to students (Sanacore, 1992, as cited in Burns, 1998) and play a facilitator role in the classroom. Even though students have been more familiar with the rules of operating discussions, the teacher still has to hold a debriefing at the end of each discussion. By doing so, students can evaluate their discussions and adjust their discussion strategies.

**The role of the student.** Basically, students in peer-led literature discussion groups work together to articulate questions, concerns, problems, and understandings of text in heterogeneous groups. They learn from one another how to interpret texts as well as examine their differing interpretations of texts and come to new understandings of them (Gruhler, 2004). To make discussion more meaningful and successful, Keegan and Shrake (1991) suggested that the teacher can assign students specific tasks that can assist them in discussing texts in small groups since students will assume more responsibility while joining in group discussions. These specific tasks include the reader, who initiates the discussion by raising questions; the coordinator, who is responsible for making sure that each group member has opportunities to participate in the discussion; the mechanic, who is in charge of recording the group conversation; the notetaker,

who keeps track of students' roles and the content that the group decides to read for the following class.

In Daniels' (2002) model of peer-led literature discussion, basic discussion roles include the connector, who connects what they read to their lives, their experiences, and their feelings; the questioner, who analyzes the text and challenges and critiques peers' opinions; the passage master, who is responsible for sharing or analyzing special or important sections of the text; and the illustrator, who is in charge of providing graphic, nonlinguistic responses to the text. Role sheets detailing specific tasks for students to perform in discussions enable students to better read and discuss texts. Daniels emphasized that the role sheets are temporary scaffolding. When students internalize their jobs in discussions, the role sheets are supposed to disappear.

According to Chou (1999), when students engage in discussions based on each role in the group, high status students may have fewer chances to dominate the discussion and low status students will not be ignored. However, Short (1995) deemed that dividing tasks and roles among group members "shuts down the thinking and talk which is at the heart of dialogue" (p. 2).

**Problems in student-led literature discussion.** Numerous studies have suggested that literature discussion groups promote students' literacy learning and social skills. However, peer-led literature discussion involves "extremely complex academic, social, and cultural contexts" (Evans, 1996, p. 194). Students' academic status, cultural background, personalities, or gender may result in some problems during discussions, such as marginalization and silence. Evans (1996) stated that "the assumption that peer-led discussion groups represent democratic contexts for students to voice their opinions and exercise control over their learning becomes problematic" (p. 194). Also, Swann (1994) claimed that if some students in discussion groups are

in reactive roles or dominate discussions, it is difficult for all group members to get an equal opportunity to use language actively.

Issues of power related to gender also are present in literature discussion groups (Evan, 1996; Cherland, 1992). Some researchers have explored how gender affects students' interactions and literacy practices in peer-led literature discussion. A study by Evan (1996) discovered that how students positioned themselves in groups was partly due to the influence of social markers. That is, "The boys consistently positioned themselves as powerful members who had the right to tease and belittle the girls, an action which simultaneously positioned the girls as powerless members who were expected to accept such treatment" (p. 200). For instance, one of the girls, Vivianne, tried to position herself as group leader by trying to bring the group's attention to the task of discussing the book. One of the boys responded to Vivianne by saying, "You can't boss him around, Vivianne, like you're the boss of the group" (p. 198). Evan asserted that because the boys rejected Vivianne's positioning herself as group leader, she "relinquished her position as leader and became a silent member of the group" (p. 199). In another study, Evans (2002) found that when boys and girls worked together in student-led literature discussions, they tended to physically isolate themselves. Also, they often blamed the other gender for nonparticipation and this frequently split the group into gendered homogeneous subgroups. The students indicated that it was much easier for them to work in same-gender groups. One girl said, "When you're in an all-girl group, it's easier" (p. 61). In addition, many girls commented that they were afraid that the boys would tease them. Evans considered that "age" was another reason for these students preferring to work in same-gender groups. These students were eleven years old. At this age, boys and girls were beginning to like each other. Hence they preferred to work in same-gender groups to avoid embarrassment. One girl indicated,

“Maybe you like somebody in the group and you might feel embarrassed to talk” (p. 61). Evans concluded that many difficulties in student-led literature discussion resulted from gender issues. Another study by Cherland (1994) echoed Evan’s work. She reported that in each mixed gender group, the boys apparently took more turns and expressed more disagreement. These discursive practices allowed them to attain “symbolic power” (p. 41), a means of domination, in the group and the girls became the victims of this symbolic power. Cherland also found that teasing was a common way for the boys to establish dominance in the groups.

There seems to be an assumption that student-led literature discussion creates democratic learning contexts in which all students’ voices are valued equally (Evans, 1996). Cohen (1984) questioned the assumption that cooperative learning contexts are equitable places for students to assume their ownership of learning. She further pointed out that a student’s status in class can develop status orders in a group and influences his/her participation. Status differences—differences in academic abilities or popularity—may result in inequitable participation in groups. High-status students tend to dominate discussions while low-status students remain passive because they know that they are not expected to make contributions (Maloch, 2000). Some studies have suggested that students’ academic status in class impacts discursive relations in peer-led literature discussion. For instance, a study by Allen, Moller, and Stroup (2003) detailed how two fifth-grade girls who struggled with reading were positioned in four different literature discussion settings. The researchers discovered that when these two girls responded to the text, their peers tended to treat them with unproductive and detrimental reactions such as teasing and mocking. This harmful treatment resulted in the girls’ continued status as struggling readers. The girls’ reading ability, social status, and literacy expectation significantly influenced the way they participated in the discussions.

## **Research on Student-Led Literature Discussion outside the United States**

A number of studies have suggested that student-led literature discussion is an effective reading activity that can promote students' literacy skills and is being implemented in many schools in the United States. Some Taiwanese researchers have conducted studies on student-led literature discussion in Taiwanese schools as well. Most of the studies were conducted with high school or college students in EFL settings. Chou (1999) investigated Taiwanese 11<sup>th</sup> graders' speaking and writing in English in an English summer program. She discovered that the students were able to read aesthetically, which included constructing meaning, involving themselves personally, inquiring, and critiquing. They made considerable progress in speaking and writing in English in terms of language competence. Additionally, the students changed their perspectives on learning English.

Hsu and Sai (2007) explored Taiwanese college students' perceptions and experiences with Literature Circles (LC) in both EFL and JFL (Japanese as a Foreign Language) reading classrooms. They reported that the students in both groups had positive attitudes toward LC as a useful approach in language development. The students' performance in literature discussions was affected by their preferences about reading materials and discussion roles, teachers' feedback, and grading policies used in the course. In addition, the students' low-quality work in literature discussions resulted from the lack of motivation to finish texts. Hsu and Sai suggested that when implementing student-led literature discussion groups in classrooms, teachers should train students in selecting appropriate texts for literature discussion as well as offer opportunities for them to practice different discussion roles. In her study, Su (2009) examined LC with seventy-one Taiwanese college students in a Western Literature course. The study centered on the students' attitudes toward LC and differences in attitudes by gender. The findings suggest

that the cognitive, social, and affective factors such as improving literacy and conversational skills and developing higher order thinking were three key contributing elements influencing the participants' attitudes toward LC. Regarding attitudes toward LC possessed by female and male students, Su reported that female students had more positive attitudes than male students did toward participating in LC. Additionally, more males than females said that they preferred to choose their group members since they got frustrated with their assigned peers. Another study by Lang (2007) explored the effect of literature discussion on the English language development of Taiwanese college students who enrolled in a freshmen reading class. She discovered that literature discussion groups improved the participants' achievement outcomes, increased their reading interest, and led to more independence with regard to reading English literature.

Research on student-led literature discussion was also conducted in Japanese schools. Furr (2004) implemented student-led discussion of literature in a British Literature course for his EFL students in a Japanese college. He reported that: (a) By using role sheets, the students were able to discuss the text at a deep level; (b) In order to make contributions to discussions, the students' writing was copious; (c) Most of the students were able to speak in English 90% of the time during discussions; and (d) The students eagerly pointed to passages within a text to support their arguments and questioned each other in order to figure out what the text really meant.

### **Reading Comprehension Strategies**

According to Gambrell and Jawitz (1993), the goal of teaching reading comprehension strategies is to help students “develop metacognitive awareness over a set of strategies that students can use independently when reading the text” (p. 265). Text comprehension can be enhanced when readers are able to adopt appropriate cognitive strategies or to reason

strategically (Chilcoat, 2003). Such strategies include summarizing, generating questions, making connections, and visualizing.

### **Visualizing**

Visualizing, as defined by Keene and Zimmermann (1997), is a comprehension strategy that aids readers in transforming words into mental images. These images are evoked by the text as well as by readers' past experiences. As Gambrell and Jawitz (1993) stated, "The construction of mental images encourages use of prior experience as part of creating vivid representations of prose" (p. 265). By connecting past experiences to the text, the reader adds rich detail that helps better understand the text and makes the text more memorable. This connection allows the reader to create unique interpretations of the text and recall significant ideas from it (Chilcoat, 2003). In addition to reader-generated mental images, using text-relevant illustrations also has been documented as a strategy that fosters reading comprehension (e.g., Levie & Lentz, 1982). Gambrell and Jawitz (1993) investigated the effects of mental imagery and text-relevant illustrations on fourth graders' reading comprehension. The result suggested that a combination of mental imagery and illustrations is the most effective approach to enhancing text comprehension.

### **Questioning**

Questioning opens the door to understanding and helps explore new ideas (Chilcoat, 2003). Asking questions before, during, and after reading allows readers to construct meaning, enhance comprehension, identify main ideas, discover new ideas, clarify confusion, and check their understanding of the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Many early studies have reported that self-questioning has a positive effect on learning from texts (e.g. Davey & McBride, 1986; Williamson, 1996). In their study, Davey and McBride (1986) examined students' reading

comprehension after they read a passage. Fifty-two students were divided into two groups: a read-reread group and a question-generation group. The results suggested that students who were in the question-generation group demonstrated greater comprehension than those in the read-reread group. Additionally, Hansen (1981) investigated the effectiveness of the questioning strategy. Participants, in this study, were divided into three groups and given different instruction: one received extensive practice in answering inferential questions; a second was given training in constructing new knowledge with prior knowledge, and a third was instructed with the traditional basal program. The researcher discovered that the participants in the first two groups demonstrated better text comprehension than did those in the third group.

### **Making Connections**

The strategy of making connections is related to schema theory. Schema, the sum total of background knowledge or experiences, is what each reader brings to the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). When activating schema, the reader purposefully links past experiences and relevant information to what s/he is reading. Golden and Guthrie (1986) pointed out that meaning is not merely transferred from the text to the reader. Instead, the reader uses cues to construct meaning. Given ambiguous text information, the reader uses several sources to clarify confusion, such as personal experiences, background knowledge, and the context of the reading situation. Smith (1991) investigated the cognitive processes of five more successful and five less successful ninth-grade readers. He reported that successful readers were more likely to rely on their prior experiences and knowledge in their responses to the text.

### **Inferring**

Inferring is a reader's ability to combine their experience and belief with the text (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Readers utilize their own life experiences, logic, creativity, and thoughts

to make predictions, interpret a text, draw conclusions, and make judgments. They unite what they have known with text information to predict what is to come (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). When readers have more information, they are more likely to make an accurate inference about content. To promote students' ability to infer meaning, explicit instruction is needed. In their study, Gordon and Pearson (1998) designed an explicit strategy for helping students improve inferring skills. Students, in this study, received a two-month-long period of training. Gordon and Pearson reported that the students benefitted from the explicit instruction in inferring. Also, in their study, Dewiz, Carr, and Patberg (1987) examined the effects of inference training on four groups of fifth graders. In the training, the treatment for each group was different. Findings suggested that the students who received sufficient training gained greater insights into their inferring processes.

### **Summarizing**

Summarizing is the ability to synthesize the text and create a big idea (Chilcoat, 2003). Rather than merely find the main idea, summarizing is to find key ideas from different sections of the text and then organize and group them into a coherent whole. It is the process "by which we forsake much of what we learn in order to make sense of that which we determine is most pivotal for us" (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997, p. 167). In order to summarize, students need the ability to analyze the text and abandon inessential information (Maxworthy & Barry, 1992). They bring together different ideas and facts from the text without retelling the entire text.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Language plays an important role in teaching and learning in classrooms. The study of classroom interaction is the investigation of that communication system. Cazden (2001) stated that language is a medium by which much teaching takes place. Through language, students

show their teachers what they have learned as well as their doubts. Also, they use language to construct meaning, identities, and social significance (Smith, 2008). There are a number of approaches for investigating classroom talk and interaction. In this study, I used interactional sociolinguistics approach.

### **Overview of Interactional Sociolinguistics Approach**

Interactional sociolinguistics (IS) is an approach for interpreting what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice. According to Gumperz (2001), IS combines concepts of sociology, linguistics, and anthropology. It focuses on the fields of culture, language, and society. According to Garfinkel (1967), interactions among people are goal-oriented moves. In dialogue, people act in pursuit of their goals and intentions (Hanks, 1996). Therefore, when listening to messages, listeners do not just encode and decode messages. They have to negotiate the meanings of messages with speakers and then infer what the speakers intended to convey through their messages. The meaning of messages is located in actions and reactions interlocutors take with one another, rather than in communication in isolated states (Bloome, Carter, Christian, & Shuart-Faris, 2005). Goffman (2004) pointed out that to decode a message, people need to understand the context in which the message is produced. The interlocutors need to “seek common ground on the spot of now and here of social interaction and communication” (Gee, 1996, p. 13). The IS approach therefore focuses on speech exchange involving two or more individuals. IS researchers are concerned with the meaning-making processes in a conversation. Their work concentrates on examining how individuals participating in a speech event adopt language to achieve their communicative goals and how they construct relationships between and among events and contexts through their interactions. In IS analysis, researchers regard speaking as a reflective process (Gumperz, 2001). They investigate how people signal to each other

connections between the event they are constructing as well as past and future events (Smith, 2008). To understand the social and interactional function of a message, IS researchers have to explore what is happening at the time the message is produced. Since some cues to the social, interactive role of the message are revealed only *after* the message has been produced, researchers examine what might occur after the message is produced. In IS analysis, researchers take presuppositions and assumptions into consideration because they are bases of the negotiation of interpretation (Gumperz, 2001). Gumperz (2001) indicated that in general, people use local or context-specific background knowledge to interpret messages. If interlocutors do not have shared presuppositions, their interpretations of the same message are more likely to be different.

### **Theoretical Tools for Interactional Sociolinguistic Analysis**

There are two theoretical tools for IS analysis of classroom interaction: intertextuality and contextualization cues.

**Intertextuality.** Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) viewed intertextuality as a social construction. That is, intertextuality describes social processes involved in how people act and react to each other. Their view is built on Bakhtin's view of language as social activity. According to Bakhtin (1981), "Language is social because any language act is a response to a preceding language act as well as other acts" (p. 26). One's actions and reactions are meant to respond to sequences of actions. From this viewpoint, the meaning of an utterance is based on previous and future events. "The meaning of an utterance is not static. It varies with ongoing conversation in which it is considered" (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993, p. 26). Therefore, utterances should be interpreted within multiple texts, rather than within a single one (Lemke, 2004).

**Contextualization cues.** Gumperz (2001) stated that engaging in verbal communication is not simply to express one's thoughts and intentions. In face-to-face interaction, people use language and other communicative strategies to make their intentions understood. These strategies are what Gumperz (1986) called *contextualization cues*. Contextualization cues include verbal, nonverbal, and prosodic signals, such as facial expressions, eye movement, pausing, volume shifts, and register shifts. They are semiotic tools that people adopt to communicate their intent and to respond to one another. They serve to construct the context which is composed of situated interpretations that have an impact upon how messages are interpreted. Gumperz (1986) stated that "a contextualization cue is any sign that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions" (p. 131). Green and Harker (1982) claimed that contextualization cues are a key to determining the meaning of messages. They make specific aspects of the social situation relevant.

Green and Wallat (1981) indicated the importance of contextualization cues in their study of classroom interaction. In their view, the analysis of the use of contextualization cues provides an understanding of what interactional behaviors are expected in a classroom because most students' responses and narratives are signaled by contextualization cues. A teacher's rising intonation, for example, may signal students to pay attention. Analyzing the use of contextualization cues is also crucial in examining cross-cultural issues in classrooms. Bloome and Clark (2006) claimed that due to different cultural backgrounds, how people use and interpret contextualization cues may differ. Based on the findings of her research, Michaels (1981) suggested that there are cross-cultural differences in how teachers signal coherence within a narrative. Teachers who do not accurately detect the meaning and function of contextualization

cues that a student adopts in order to signal coherence in his/her narrative may view the student as telling an incoherent story.

### **Conclusion**

Peer-led literature discussion groups are based on social constructivist learning theory and reader response theory. Study findings have suggested that students who participate in literature discussion groups become more engaged in reading, respond to the text beyond literal levels, and develop the ability to negotiate and co-construct the meaning of text with other group members. Students' responses to the text are more sophisticated when they are allowed to talk about topics that are meaningful to them. These findings are consistent with social constructivism and reader response, that form the theoretical basis for small-group collaborative participation structures. Although peer-led literature discussions are run by students themselves, the teacher does not release all responsibilities to them. To allow literature discussion a chance to succeed and to minimize the possibility that some students may be marginalized, the teacher should monitor the effectiveness of the literature discussions for each student, offer explicit instruction, and provide scaffolding. The teacher plays a role as a facilitator, a mediator, and an active listener in literature discussion groups. Instead of handing over all responsibilities to students immediately, the teacher should gradually release responsibilities, waiting until students demonstrate quality discussions.

Taiwanese elementary students have been accustomed to learning in a hierarchical governing system, which is central to Confucian society, through a skills-based approach. Most of them are not accustomed to challenging others' ideas and generating questions. To score well on standardized examinations, they tend to take an efferent stance in reading. Some Taiwanese researchers have examined the influence of literature discussion groups; however, these studies

were conducted in middle schools or colleges in EFL classrooms, with a focus on the development of participants' English proficiency. Although these researchers reported that participants benefited from these types of instructional activity, they did not suggest what helpful strategies or explicit instruction could be offered by teachers to help students move from a teacher-directed discussion mode to a student-centered discussion format. Furthermore, these studies did not document what problems or conflicts emerged when the participants had more responsibility and autonomy in their learning processes. This study could fill these gaps by examining how six Taiwanese elementary students respond to texts and interact with each other in discussions, documenting what problems or conflicts occur during discussions, and describing explicit instruction and scaffolding that are offered by the teacher/researcher to facilitate discussions.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine the interaction and conversation of a group of six Taiwanese fourth graders participating in peer-led literature discussion in an out-of-classroom learning environment. In this chapter, I first present decisions about methodological design. Then the site of the study, participants, and procedures are described. Following these discussions, data collection and data analysis are explained.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Case Study**

Since the main purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and depict the reality of a group of fourth graders when they took part in peer-led literature discussions, the research methodology guiding this inquiry was qualitative. To answer my research questions, I needed to descriptively analyze student talk and interactions based on their situated contexts. Therefore, the case study methodology was adopted. According to Merriam (2009), three features of qualitative case study are essential: (a) particularistic—the researcher focuses on a particular situation, program, event, or person; (b) heuristic—to make the reader better understand the study, the researcher “extends the reader’s experience or confirms what is known” (p. 30); (c) descriptive—the researcher describes the incidents being examined in detail. Case study research is designed to extend one’s understanding of the case but not to promote generalization beyond it (Stake, 1998). Instead of testing hypotheses, case study researchers collect as much information about the problem as possible with which to analyze and interpret phenomena (Merriam, 1998). In this study, a case study added to what people have already known about student-led literature discussion groups.

## **Site of the Study**

The study was conducted in a suburban public school, also referred to as Shuang-Cheng (pseudonym), located in a working-class neighborhood in a suburban area of Xindian, New Taipei City, Taiwan. The city, the school, and the classroom are described as follows.

### **The City**

The school, Shuang-Cheng Elementary School, was located in Xindian city, a mid-sized southern part of Taipei County with a population of approximately 290,000 people. According to the 2007 census (the last official count taken in Taiwan), the population demographics were: 49.6% males and 50.4% females. According to this same source, the annual population growth rate was 1.58%. Top city industries included higher education, tourism, and manufacturing. Public transportation included bus services and the Taipei Mass Rapid Transit System.

### **The School**

In Taiwan, the school year is divided into two semesters. The first semester is from September to the middle of January and the second semester is from the middle or late February to the end of June. Students have winter vacation for approximately one month and summer vacation for two months. A homeroom teacher is in charge of a class for two years. In Shuang-Cheng Elementary School, the school starts at 7:50 am and ends at 3:40 pm. Lunch break is from 12-1:10 pm. First and second graders have four 40-minute classes a day. They leave school after lunch. The others have seven 40-minute classes a day. Students have a 10-minute recess after each class.

The school spanned first through sixth grade and each grade consisted of eight classes. Of the 1325 students enrolled in the school, 79% of the students were Taiwanese, 16% were New Taiwanese Immigrant children, whose fathers were Taiwanese and mothers came from countries

in the region of Southeast Asia such as Vietnam and Indonesia, 3% were aborigines, and 2% were other ethnic origin. Seven percent of the students received free-lunches and 15% of the student body came from single-parent families. The community in which the school was located has a large industrial base with a number of retail stores and restaurants.

The faculty at Shuang-Cheng was composed of 48 regular classroom teachers, two art teachers, three music teachers, three English teachers, three science teachers, two computer teachers, and two special education teachers. The school's principal described parent involvement as high. Parents played an active role on special occasions such as field trips, special ceremonies, and parties. Also, it was common to see one or two parents reading with children in classrooms.

The average class size at Shuang-Cheng was 27.6 students. Silent reading and word study instruction were adopted by most Chinese instructors. A learning disability "pull-out" program was available in the school and 0.5% of the students participated in this program. None of the participating students in this study joined the program.

The school principal was receptive and supportive of this study. To ensure that the study was consistent with the school policy, letters of approval were sought from the principal and the classroom teacher. Moreover, they were kept informed of the progress of the study through periodic verbal communication.

### **The Classroom**

Participating students were selected from a classroom of 28 students. Twenty-two students were Taiwanese, three were New Taiwanese Immigrant children, and three were aborigines. Of the 28 students, two received free lunches and one received additional pull-out special education services in mathematics and reading instruction.

The Chinese curriculum in this classroom was based on the National Curriculum Guidelines created by the Ministry of Education. Instructional materials were textbooks. Teachers' instruction needed to meet the National Curriculum Guidelines and follow textbooks. In this classroom, whole-class teaching was quite common. Mr. Chen prepared for classes thoroughly. His students had very few opportunities to work on tasks in pairs or in small groups. Class seating arrangements were changed as needed to match assigned tasks. Since the students needed to finish all textbooks when a semester ended, time for them to read trade books was limited. The period of opening-day activities was the only time period that they could read trade books.

The daily schedule (Appendix A), created at the beginning of the school year, could be altered on occasion. It was difficult to make school-wide changes because special education services, special area classes, and lunch schedules had been established. Making major changes might result in inconvenience for staff and students. During the period of opening-day activities, which was 30 minutes, the students were asked to either read individually or complete worksheets after finishing routines such as turning in homework and clearing up classroom. The teacher sometimes worked with a group of three low-achieving students to promote their Chinese and mathematics proficiencies.

In this classroom, students' art and written work were displayed on walls and bulletin boards. Although most of the walls were covered with students' work, there were some commercially made posters. One chart was placed on one of the two bulletin boards. It was used as the teacher's behavior management plan. In the back of the classroom, there were two bookshelves filled with books, magazines, and newspapers. The school and the teacher provided

the students with a wide variety of books, including personal narrative, science fiction, historical fiction, biographies, and children's picture books.

The teacher encouraged parents' involvement and support. Parent involvement was demonstrated in many ways, including participating in parent-teacher conferences, providing needed classroom supplies, helping with parties and field trips, and communicating with Mr. Chen through notes and phone calls.

## **Participants**

### **Teacher-Researcher**

**Assumptions.** When working in Taiwanese elementary schools, I had the opportunity to see how curricular decisions were made and implemented in school. I was aware of a gap between school practices and educational research. I did not believe that curricular reform would necessarily bring research and school practices together. Narrowly defined solutions are not applicable for all schools and students. To improve Chinese instruction for students, I deemed that it was necessary to investigate the relationships among language, students' interactions, and the sociocultural contexts of students' lives.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), "a researcher's standpoint can be considered as entry into the data" (p. 34). His/her own perspectives or identities provide a certain angle of vision for interpreting data. Therefore, a researcher's background affects the interpretation of data in a qualitative study. In this study, I played both teacher and researcher roles. I recognize that my five years of experience as an elementary school teacher, my six years of learning experience in the United States, my identity as a Taiwanese female, as well as my knowledge of peer-led literature discussion and children's literature has influenced my perspectives. As a former elementary school teacher, I knew how to interact and communicate with Taiwanese

teachers, students, and parents appropriately. With proper interaction and communication, it was less difficult for me to get permission from Mr. Chen and the principal and to recruit participants. My six years of learning experience in the United States contributed to my positive attitude toward opinions which differ from mine and my willingness to listen to different ideas and to defend my ideas. In this study, I encouraged my participants to express themselves and challenged their peers. Also, I taught them to respect different opinions. As a student of minority groups in the United States, I understood how difficult it was to live and study with mainstream students. As a result, I was concerned more about my two participants—Chen and Lin, who were from non-mainstream families. In order to let them feel more comfortable to work with their mainstream peers, I provided more assistance for them. My identity as a Taiwanese female may have influenced how I interacted with the participants and interpreted their talk. In the Taiwanese society, the status of women is lower than that of men. As a female, I was sensitive to gender issues. I expressed my opinions on gender inequality and gender stereotypes and challenged the participants' views. As a Taiwanese, I knew some subjects such as homosexuality and politics were taboo for particular groups of people. I tried not to express my opinions when these types of subjects were discussed since I worried my opinions may be spread, which may cause trouble. Furthermore, my knowledge of peer-led literature discussion and children's literature impacted how I did preparation work for the participants as well as facilitated their discussions.

### **Participating Students**

**Recruiting procedures.** I recruited six participating students from Mr. Chen's class in Shuang-Cheng Elementary School in Xindian, New Taipei City, Taiwan. I have been a friend of Mr. Chen and have an existing relationship with him. The recruitment strategy was consistent with the convenience sampling strategy. That is, the researcher has known the gatekeeper of the

participating classroom for a long while and has established rapport with him (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

In November of 2009, I obtained permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board Office at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Once permission from the University was acquired, I asked Mr. Chen, via a phone call, for permission to conduct research in his classroom. At that time, Mr. Chen and I came to an informal agreement that the study could be conducted in his classroom. On December 15, 2009, I met Mr. Chen in his classroom. At this meeting, I detailed the procedure of my study and indicated that I wanted to work with him to implement peer-led literature discussion groups in his classroom. Mr. Chen considered that for him, this plan was not workable because of his heavy workload in school, time constraints, and a full classroom schedule. However, he felt comfortable to let me conduct this study by pulling out his students during the period of day-opening activities (8:00 am-8:40 am). He allowed me to use an empty classroom adjacent to his classroom to work with participants and asked me to report bi-monthly on their performance. At this meeting, Mr. Chen signed his consent letter. On the same day, I also met with the principal and detailed the procedure of the study to him. The principal gave me his permission to conduct the study.

Once permission from Mr. Chen and the principal was obtained, I sought permission from the parents of the students since the students were under the age of eighteen. I provided details of my study through a presentation in a parent-teacher conference held on December 18, 2009. Parent consent letters were distributed to all parents after the presentation. On December 18, I explained the study to the students during the period of day-opening activities. All students were given student consent letters.

I was in charge of collecting the consent letters because I did not want parents and students to feel pressure from Mr. Chen to participate in this study. Twelve consent letters were returned to me. I checked these twelve students' qualifications through one-on-one talks and then excluded four students. Three of them had musical instrument practice every morning during the period of day-opening activities so they were excluded. One showed her reluctance after the one-on-one talk with me. Out of the rest of the eight students, six students were finally chosen by Mr. Chen and me based on their Chinese proficiency levels, personalities, academic achievements, and personal interests. Two students were excluded because they could not get along with each other. The reason I wanted to put six students in a peer-led literature discussion group was that one of those six might be absent on any given day and I believed that five or even four were still plenty of people for a discussion.

It was made clear to the students and parents through oral and written communication that: (a) Participation in this study was completely voluntary and participants could end their participation in the study at any time without penalty; (b) Participants' performance in discussion would not affect their grades in any subject; (c) Participants would have to fully participate in peer-led literature discussion groups on Tuesday and Thursday mornings (8:00 am-8:40 am) from September to December, 2010; (d) Participants should complete assigned reading and prepare for discussion before discussions took place; (e) Interviews, discussions, and videotapes would be kept confidential; and (f) Pseudonyms would be used to protect the identity of the participants.

**Participants.** The group was composed of three boys and three girls with various interests, learning styles, reading levels, cultural backgrounds, and academic strengths and

weaknesses. Each participant's information was collected through interviews with Mr. Chen and the participants.

*Chou.* Chou was an eleven-year-boy from a middle-income family. His father was a businessman. His mother came from mainland China. Chou was the older sibling in his family. At the time of the study, his younger brother was a second grader in the same elementary school.

Chou was described by Mr. Chen as a child who enjoyed learning and was curious about things around him. Chou's greatest academic strength lay in science and mathematics. He was a high-achieving student based on standardized tests held on June 17 and October 7, 2009. In whole-class discussions, he eagerly expressed his opinions, but sometimes it was difficult for the teacher to catch his points. When participating in small-group activities, Chou often took a leadership role, intending to control tasks that should be completed by all group members. He got along well with others in the classroom. He was quite playful in his interactions with others. Chou indicated that he enjoyed reading, especially science fiction. His parents did not offer him books so he borrowed books from the school or the community library. He read books everyday after his homework was done. He also enjoyed playing video games and surfing on the Internet. When Chou was in second grade, he was taught to summarize stories and write down thoughts after reading. However, he had no experience in discussing stories with peers in a small group.

*Lo.* Lo was a ten-year-old girl who was the older sibling in her family. At the time of the study her brother was a second grader in the same school. She came from a middle-class family. Her father was a mechanic working for China Airlines and her mother was a nurse. Lo's mother usually worked night shifts so she had little time to spend with Lo. Lo's parents had high expectations of her and expected her to do well academically and behaviorally.

Mr. Chen described Lo as a self-disciplined student. Lo's greatest academic strength lay in Chinese. She took her academic performance seriously and was very concerned about her grades. She was a high-achieving student based on the standardized tests held on June 17 and October 7, 2009. She helped other classmates do school work often. In whole-class discussions, Lo tended to be rather passive. She seldom expressed her opinions. When taking part in small-group work, she tended to participate more. As a reader, Mr. Chen indicated that Lo was a skilled reader. She read lengthy chapter books. She preferred to read adolescent or adult novels, but not children's literature. She believed children's literature to be too infantile. Lo's parents seldom bought her books so she often read her mother's adult novels.

**Wu.** Wu was a ten-year-old boy who was the only child in his family. He lived with his mother and visited his father regularly. Since Wu's mother had a job that extended into the evening hours, Wu stayed at his grandmother's place after school until his mother picked him up after work. Wu indicated that he liked to stay in his grandmother's house to play with his six-year-old cousin. To improve Chinese and English performance, Wu was tutored by a college student in a private institute three times a week.

Wu was described by Mr. Chen as a bright, cheerful child. He laughed easily and had numerous friends. He sometimes made fun of his classmates. He had a sensitive nature when he was embarrassed and upset. Wu played a variety of sports and was very confident in his athletic ability. He was an avid television watcher. As a student, Wu excelled in mathematics. He was adept at explaining his thinking and problem-solving strategies in mathematics. He took his schoolwork seriously, but he was not overly concerned with his grades. Mr. Chen reported that Wu was outgoing in the classroom. He made comments frequently in whole-class discussion. His academic performance was at an upper-middle level based on the standardized tests held on June

17 and October 7, 2009. Wu said that he enjoyed reading historical fiction and comic books but was easily distracted from his reading. He was able to read chapter books, but frequently abandoned them after reading only the first chapter or two.

*Jian.* Jian was an eleven-year-old girl from a middle-class family. At the time of the study, her older brother was a tenth grader. Her father was a manager and her mother was a jewelry designer. Her parents were supportive of her learning in school and had high expectations for her.

Mr. Chen described Jian as a friendly, smart child. She was a high-achieving student based on the standardized tests. She had many friends and got along well with them. Jian tended to be somewhat shy with teachers, but she was gregarious with her peers. Jian was strong in all academic areas and was highly motivated. Jian indicated that she took her academic performance seriously and wanted to do well to please her parents. While she often took a leadership role in small-group work, she seldom expressed her thoughts or opinions voluntarily in whole-class discussions. As a reader, Mr. Chen described Jian as an engaged reader who enjoyed reading. She rarely abandoned books and eagerly discussed her reading with peers. Jian said that her parents offered her a wide variety of books. Playing video games, watching TV, surfing on the Internet, and reading books were activities she usually did after school.

*Lin.* Lin, a ten-year-old girl, lived with her father and grandmother. She came from a working-class family. She was the only child in her family. At the time of the study, her mother was in prison. Her father and grandmother ran a small cafeteria in a nearby community. Lin helped her father's business during weekends. She was tutored by a community volunteer for one hour every day after school.

Lin was described by Mr. Chen as an extroverted child. She was quite clever but did not work hard. She had difficulty getting along with peers and lacked a network of friends. She exhibited poor social skills. To gain peers' attention, she sometimes talked loudly in class or intentionally broke classroom rules. When the class was divided into several small groups, very few students wanted to work with her. She lacked skills in establishing and maintaining friendships.

Mr. Chen considered Lin an unmotivated student. Homework or in-class assignments were seldom completed and submitted on time. She needed adults or peers to aid her in doing assignments. She could not work independently. Her Chinese and mathematics proficiency was at a low level based on the standardized tests. She suffered from dyslexia but she rejected pull-out special education services. She had good performance in art and music. Most of the time, she did not pay attention to what was going on in class. She was easily distracted by other things around her. She only involved herself eagerly in class when discussion topics interested her. As a reader, Lin indicated that she had difficulty in reading independently so she preferred to listen to stories the teacher read aloud. During independent reading time, she always chose picture books, but she only looked at illustrations and skipped written texts.

*Chen.* Chen was a ten-year-old boy who was the older sibling in his family. At the time of the study, his younger brother was a second grader in the same elementary school. Chen was a New Taiwanese Immigrant child. His father was Taiwanese. His mother came from Vietnam and spoke little Chinese so that she could not offer much support for Chen's academic learning. His parents ran a fruit store in a nearby community.

Mr. Chen described Chen as an easy-going, energetic boy. His Chinese proficiency was at an intermediate level based on the standardized tests held. He consistently worked hard and

wanted to do well. He was eager to express himself in whole-class discussions but sometimes his comments were irrelevant to the topic discussed. He sometimes stammered when he was anxious. Mr. Chen described Chen as a transitional reader. He was becoming more independent in choosing reading materials for himself and read them with a high degree of comprehension. Chen indicated that his parents never bought him books so he tried to read books as many as he could during independent reading time. He liked to watch TV, play videogames, and play basketball.

### **Procedures**

The following sections outline a timeline for the three phases of inquiry. Table 1 presents the description of each phase of the study. The first phase of the study was completed in December 2009 through January 2010. In Taiwan, school year is divided into two semesters. The first semester is from September to the middle of January and the second semester is from the middle or late February to the end of June. When I conducted the first phase of the study, it was almost the end of the first semester of 2009 school year. In this phase, the participants were third graders. The other two phases were completed in September through December 2010, which was during the first semester of 2010 school year. In these two phases, the participants were fourth graders. They were still in the same class with Mr. Chen as their home room teacher.

Table 1

*Phases of Study*

Phase 1 (preliminary data collection) December 15, 2009-January 4, 2010	Phase 2 (Weeks 1-4) September 2, 2010-September 30, 2010	Phase 3 (Weeks 5-18) October 5, 2010-December, 29, 2010.
The researcher collected preliminary data, including	The participants were introduced to the concept of	The participants operated the discussions by utilizing the

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Phase 1 (preliminary data collection) December 15, 2009-January 4, 2010	Phase 2 (Weeks 1-4) September 2, 2010-September 30, 2010	Phase 3 (Weeks 5-18) October 5, 2010-December, 29, 2010.
information about the city, the school, the classroom, and the participating students.	student-led literature discussion, discussion rules discussion strategies, and reading comprehension strategies. The participants learned to jot down responses on sticky notes. The researcher selected appropriate texts.	discussion and reading comprehension strategies and following the discussion rules. The researcher offered continued support.

**First Phase of the Study: Preliminary Data Collection**

In the first phase of research, I focused on becoming familiar with the participants. This phase lasted three weeks, from December 15, 2009 to January 4, 2010. The major data collection techniques were participant observation, field notes, and formal and informal interviews with the teacher and the participants. Each of these is described below.

**Participant observation.** To become familiar with the participants, I observed and sometimes participated in classroom activities for four full days per week, including whole-class discussion, small-group work, outdoor activities, and reading and math tutoring. By joining in these classroom activities, I built rapport with the participants.

**Field notes.** During all observations, I wrote observational notes. These notes mainly described the participants’ behaviors that stood out as well as my personal feelings and reactions to specific behaviors of the participants. Depictions of classroom activities and teacher-student interactions were included in field notes as well. The notes were sketchy since I could not write as quickly as things happened. In addition, I jotted down some questions about the participants’

behaviors. In order to get answers to my questions, I knew interviewing the teacher would be necessary.

**Formal and informal interviews with the teacher.** At the end of each visit, I informally talked to Mr. Chen about the day's events, the participants' performance, and my concerns. This enabled me to gain some information regarding the participants' backgrounds. Following these informal interviews, notes were made and further expanded. In addition to these informal interviews, I also interviewed Mr. Chen formally on December 28 in his classroom. The interview was one hour long. In this interview, I collected more detailed information about the participants' cultural backgrounds, academic performance, academic and personal interests, personalities, and special needs. This interview was audiotaped and later transcribed.

**Formal interview with each participant.** Although the teacher offered me detailed information about each participant's family and cultural background and academic strengths and weaknesses, I found that I did not have information about the participants' attitudes toward reading as well as their reading experiences. Therefore, I formally interviewed each participant on December 29 and 30. Interviews were conducted in an empty classroom adjacent to Mr. Chen's classroom. This was done to minimize distractions from other class members. During each one-on-one interview, each participant was asked about his/her attitude toward reading, parents' expectation of him/her, reading experiences, hobbies, and his/her family (Appendix B). Each interview lasted about 25 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped to ensure accuracy and later transcribed.

**The participants' initial experience with literature discussion.** Based on the information obtained from the interviews, the participants had some experiences with small group discussions. However, these discussions aimed to solve math or science problems posted

by the teacher. I wondered how peer-led literature discussion would go when it was operated by students who had no prior experience. Hence I offered an opportunity for the participants to discuss a picture book titled *A Liar* (Hsiao, 2006). On December 30, the participants and I met in an empty classroom from approximately 8-8:40 am. The participants were given books and asked to read silently and to write down their thoughts or questions in preparation for discussion. On December 31, 2009 and January 4, 2010, the discussions, with little intervention on my part, took place. The discussions were audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed. These two discussions not only offered me an opportunity to consider possible coding schemes for transcribed data but also allowed me to gain experience in facilitating the participants' future literature discussions.

In these two literature discussions, I found that except for Lin, the previously mentioned unmotivated student, the other participants were able to freely express personal feelings or opinions and connect their life experiences to the text. This, in part, may result from the fact that *A Liar* (Hsiao, 2006) has relevance to the participants' school lives as well as covering controversial issues. This finding let me know that stories related to students' lives enable them to more easily maintain discussions. Although the participants could make connections and share responses to the book, they seemed to have difficulty in getting evidence from the text to support their arguments, initiating topics, and challenging one another's arguments. To make discussions more successful, I thought that teaching the participants reading comprehension strategies such as clarifying arguments and questioning was needed.

### **Second Phase of Study: Preparatory Instruction and Text Selection**

**Preparatory instruction.** To give peer-led literature discussion the best opportunity for success, students need some strategies for participating in discussions (Daniels, 2002). Also,

Barnes and Todd (1995) stated that when students take the responsibility for managing discussions, they need a number of discussion strategies such as a strategy for negotiating who talks, when, and how; deal with conflicts; and how to encourage group members to make contributions. In this study, the participants were new to student-led literature discussion. To allow discussions to be more successful, the participants received preparatory instruction during the first month of the study. They were introduced to the concept of student-led literature discussion, discussion rules, reading comprehension and discussion strategies, and using sticky notes. Each discussion rule was explained and each strategy was demonstrated. The participants were offered opportunities to practice each strategy. In this phase, the participants and I met approximately at 8 am every Tuesday and Thursday. Each meeting lasted about 25 minutes. However, this time frame was changed to lunch break because it was difficult for the participants to start the discussions on time because some of them were usually late to school. Without sufficient time, the quality of their discussions was low and the discussions usually finished in a rush. To increase the quality of the discussions, I thought the discussion time needed to be changed. After having a talk with Mr. Chen and receiving his permission, the participants and I met at 12:35 pm every Tuesday and Thursday, starting from September 23, 2010. More detailed descriptions about the preparatory instruction are provided in Chapter 7.

**Selecting texts.** A total of nine picture books and two novels were selected for this study. A picture book is a book in which illustrations play a significant role in telling the story (Lechner, 1993). In picture books, an illustration is presented on every page or on one of every pair of facing pages. Basically, I chose texts based on the participants' interests such as *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009) and *Memories* (Chen, 2000) and special needs such as *The Water from the Mountain* (Ye, 2008), *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), and *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997).

To allow the participants to raise discussion topics more easily, I selected texts that involved potential issues such as *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1996) and had relevance to the participants' lives such as *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009) and *Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007).

Table 2 presents the description of each selected text and the reason(s) the text was selected.

Table 2

*Reading Materials*

The title of the text	Descriptions	Reason(s) for selecting the text
<i>Who Stole My Lunch</i> (Ye, 2007)	In this picture book, Wei, his classmates, and Monkey had some interpersonal problems. When Wei found out that his lunch was gone, Wei and his classmates suspected that Monkey stole Wei's lunch. In fact, they misjudged Monkey.	The story happened in school, which was relevant to the participants' lives. The participants can share what interpersonal problems they face in school, how they deal with these problems, and their feelings of being misjudged.
<i>The Water from the Mountain</i> (Ye, 2008)	This picture book is about how animals in the mountain dealt with their big problem—no water in the creek.	Based on my classroom observation during the first phase of the study, I found some participants had difficulty solving their problems along. They intended to rely on Mr. Chen and their peers. Through reading this story, the participants can think about how to solve problems in more effective ways and how to gain resources to solve problems. This book was selected based on the participants' special need.
<i>Yes, or No</i> (Kim, 2009)	This picture book portrays how Kim got in trouble because of his hesitation and how he dealt with his worries and anxieties.	Illustrations in this book are vivid and interesting. When I showed the participants this book, most of them said they wanted to read this book.

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

The title of the text	Descriptions	Reason(s) for selecting the text
		<p>The participants had many opportunities to make their own decisions in their lives. They can share what decisions they made, how they made decisions, and think about how to make a wise decision when they feel hesitated. This book was chosen since the participants had interest in reading it. Also, it was relevant to their lives.</p>
<i>Stephanie's Ponytail</i> (Munsch, 1996)	<p>This picture book is about Stephanie, who was determined to have a hairdo more outrageous than the day before.</p>	<p>Once Chen told me that he was useless because he could not complete tasks Mr. Chen requested. Chen lacked self-confidence. This book allows the participants to know that everyone has strengths and encourages them to show their uniqueness and not to care much about others' criticisms. The participants can learn to be themselves. This book was chosen based on Chen's special need.</p>
<i>Snail Started It</i> (Reider, 1997)	<p>This picture book describes Snail, who set off a chain of negative comments when he told Pig that she was fat.</p>	<p>In the discussions, I sometimes asked the participants to elaborate on their thoughts. There were cases in which they simply said, "I don't know. Many people say so." They followed others without their own reasons. The story can teach them not to agree or follow others blindly. They can learn to think critically and know what others say is not always true. This book was selected</p>

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

The title of the text	Descriptions	Reason(s) for selecting the text
<i>One Hundred Dresses</i> (Estes, 1994)	This novel depicts how Wanda was teased by her classmates because of her Polish name and her faded dress.	based on the participants' special need. Once Mr. Chen shared Chen's learning and social relationships with other students with me. Chen was bullied by particular students. By reading this book, the participants can learn to judge what is right and what is wrong and how to stand for what is right. Also, the book allows them to discuss some issues such as bullying, teasing, and living in poverty. This book was selected because it had relevance to the participants' lives and involved potential issues.
<i>Uncle Jed's Barbershop</i> (Mitchell, 1996)	This picture book depicts how Uncle Jed struggled with opening a barbershop.	The book enables the participants to discuss social inequality. It may also allow the participants to believe that they have the power to achieve their dreams. This book was chosen since one of the social issue—social inequality—was involved in the story. I aimed to have the participants discuss social inequality in Taiwanese society.
<i>The Honest-to-Goodness Truth</i> (McKissack, 2000)	This picture book is about how Libby lost friendship because she said something at an inappropriate moment.	On 11/2, before the discussion, Lo told me that Lin was punished by Mr. Chen. When she told me so, Lin and some students were around me. Lo's words angered Lin. The book allows the

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

The title of the text	Descriptions	Reason(s) for selecting the text
		participants to know that saying something at inappropriate moments could hurt a listener's feelings. The book was picked because of Lo's special need.
<i>Black Village and White Village</i> (Lion, 2006)	This picture book portrays how the people of Black Village and White Village fought with one another and later reconciled.	The participants sometimes offered biased opinions about people from certain groups who they were unfamiliar with. This book was selected because it teaches readers to open their minds and accept people from different cultures.
<i>A Vietnamese Kid</i> (Chang, 2009)	This novel describes what challenges Nan, a New Taiwanese Immigrant child, and foreign brides face in Taiwanese society.	This book was selected because Chen, a New Taiwanese Immigrant child, could have a chance to share his life in Vietnam and difficulties he and his mother faced. The other students can reflect on their thoughts on New Taiwanese Immigrant children and foreign brides.
<i>Memories</i> (Chen, 2000)	This wordless picture book is about a girl's memory of her deceased mother.	Illustrations in this book portray people's lives in Taiwan's countryside. Since it is a wordless picture book, the participants' interpretations would not be limited by written language. Their creative thinking can be promoted.

### **Third Phase of Study: The Participants Operate the Discussions on Their Own**

After preparatory instruction was completed, the control of running the discussions was handed over to the participants. I, as a facilitator, continued to offer assistance to allow discussions to be more successful. In this phase, the participants and I met at 12:35 pm every

Tuesday and Thursday. Each session was about 40 minutes. The participants did not read the entire book before getting together for discussion. Instead, they determined how many pages they must read for each discussion session. The decision was usually made by Chou and Lo, who were high-achieving students. Three or four discussion sessions were usually needed for discussing a picture book. Six or seven discussion sessions were needed for discussing a novel.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, I used qualitative research methods and acted as a teacher-researcher. Since this study attempted to explore and understand the reality of literature discussion led by the participants, data collection primarily focused on the participants' speech and interactions. The discussions were video-taped, transcribed, and then translated. Data resources included the researcher logs, the videotaped literature discussions, the participants' notes, and the interviews with the participants. The data collection took place during an eighteen-week period.

### **Researcher Logs**

Researcher logs consisted of field notes and analytic notes. Field notes included the participants' interactions and behaviors and incidents that occurred during the discussions. Analytic notes were composed of the researcher's ongoing reflections on the data, including reflections on method, analysis, ethical dilemmas, and conflicts.

### **Videotapes**

All the participants' discussions were videotaped. My purpose for videotaping was to have a more complete record of the participants' talk and interactions. A video recorder was placed in front of the discussion group.

## **Students' Notes**

According to Hancock (1993), students' written responses provide the freedom to express personal thoughts. In this study, the participants were instructed to record their comments, thoughts, questions, or make illustrations of story events on sticky notes.

## **Interview**

To understand the participants' thoughts about literature discussions, each participant was interviewed on December 29, 2010, from 8:00 am-9:00 am. Considering that the participants and I had established certain relationships, in order to allow more genuine responses, I had my colleagues, Mrs. Lee and Mr. Zhang, interview the participants. Mrs. Lee and Mr. Zhang sometimes chatted with me in my classroom before the discussions. They talked to some participants several times, but they had no relationship with the participants. Mrs. Lee interviewed Chou, Lo, and Chen. Mr. Zhang interviewed Jian, Chen and Wu. In the one-on-one interviews, each participant was asked some questions related to the discussions (Appendix C) such as what book(s) s/he liked/disliked and why, what difficulties s/he encountered in reading and discussing processes, and what made them feel reluctant to contribute to the discussions. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Data Management**

Huberman and Miles (1998) stated that "A good storage and retrieval system is critical for keeping track of what data are available; for permitting easy, flexible, reliable use of the data...and for documenting the data analysis" (p. 183). For these reasons, I used an efficient and reliable system of data management throughout the study. Raw data including researcher logs

and the participants' notes were kept in an original form, dated, and stored in file boxes.

Videotapes were digitized and transcribed with Transana 2.42 qualitative research software.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing data, I went through different phases, including transcribing, constant comparison, categorizing, and translating. I functioned within a cycle of data collection and analysis that was ongoing, iterative, and recursive.

**Transcribing.** Videotapes of the participants' literature discussions were transcribed. I transcribed excerpts that pertained to the research questions and incidents that stood out. I attempted to make a verbatim record of the participants' talk, including filler sounds and overlapping speech. I noted the participants' tone of voice, facial expressions, body movements, and interaction gestures. It is important to note that some talk could not be fully transcribed because I could not hear clearly what had been said due to noise or the speaker's low volume. The discussion videotapes were transcribed in Chinese first. The transcriptions were read several times in order to become familiar with the content, identify patterns of responses, and responses that were deemed relevant to the research questions.

**Constant comparison method.** To look for patterns and themes in discussions, I utilized the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis began with the reading of the transcriptions, the participants' notes, and my research logs. I continually reviewed data, which helped me develop codes that I considered pertinent to the study. When new data were collected, they were compared with previous data in existing categories to see similarities and differences. If they fit, the new data were coded with the existing categories; if not, a new category or a subcategory was created.

To address the first research question about features of the participants' discussions, I examined patterns across the transcriptions of videotapes, student notes, and my research logs. I analyzed the participants' constructing meaning of texts (e.g., text-to-self connections, using prior knowledge, text-to-text connections, text-to-world connections, text-to-the author's craft), the participants' transacting with the text (e.g., relating to characters, responding to illustrations aesthetically, finding evidence from illustrations and written texts to verify ideas, re-reading the text to clarify misunderstanding), and the participants' responding to the text in a critical way (e.g., discussing critical issues, exploring characters and plots).

To address the second research question about the participants' interactions in the discussions, I looked for patterns across the videotape data and my research logs. I analyzed the participants' social interactions and peer collaboration to understand how they negotiated meaning with their peers and how they scaffolded one another's thinking and learning (e.g., offering information, correcting, helping a peer defend ideas, helping a peer get out of an embarrassing situation, affirming a peer's argument, clarifying unknown information and words, guiding a peer's thinking) and in what situations these types of interactions occurred (e.g., a lack of background knowledge, difficulty answering a peer's challenging questions, the need for more detailed information, filling in gaps in the text).

For the third research question, which focused on problems occurring during the discussions, I examined patterns across the videotape data, my research logs, and the transcripts of the interviews. I analyzed the participants' problematic responses (e.g., offering illogical arguments, expressing biased opinions), problematic interactions (e.g., teasing, quarrelling, intending to control discussion topics, losing patience), and what caused these problems (e.g., academic status, social relationships with other group members, personalities). Also, I analyzed

difficulties the participants encountered during the discussions (e.g., struggling to understanding the text, struggling with a more student-centered discussion format).

For the fourth research question, which centered on support that was offered by the teacher-researcher, I drew from the videotape data and my research logs. The teacher-researcher’s scaffolding strategies (e.g., offering preparatory instruction, explicit modeling, asking follow-up questions, offering information, monitoring the participants’ behaviors, challenging the participants’ ideas, helping clarify the participants’ meaning, restating the question, creating opportunities for the low-achieving participants to voice their ideas) were analyzed.

**Categorizing.** During this phase, I defined categories. Because coding was adopted to organize and retrieve data, the definition of a code was important. Huberman and Miles (1998) stated, “Whether codes are prespecified or developed along the way, clear operational definitions are indispensable, so they can be applied consistently by a single researcher over time and multiple researchers will be thinking about the same phenomena as they code” (p. 63). Recurrent themes and patterns were identified from the data and classified into categories. Table 3 displays the relationships among research questions, purposes of research questions, data sources, and tentative codes.

Table 3

*Research Questions, Purposes of Research Questions, Data Resources, and Tentative Codes*

Research questions	Purposes	Data resources	Tentative codes
What are features of the participants’ literature discussions?	To describe how the participants (a) constructed meaning of the text, (b) transacted with the text, and	Discussion videotapes Researcher logs Students’ notes	(a) Making connections (text-to-text, text-to-prior knowledge, text-to-world, text-to-the author’s craft)

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Research questions	Purposes	Data resources	Tentative codes
	(c) responded to the text critically.		(b) Relating to characters, responding to illustrations aesthetically, finding evidence from illustrations and written texts to verify ideas, re-reading the text to clarify misunderstanding (c) Discussing critical issues and exploring characters and plots
How do the participants interact with one another during the student-led literature discussions?	To describe how the participants negotiated meaning with their peers and scaffolded one another's thinking and learning.	Discussion videotapes Researcher logs	Offering information, correcting, helping a peer defend ideas, helping a peer get out of an embarrassing situation, affirming a peer's argument, guiding a peer's thinking, and clarifying unknown information and words
What problems emerge during the student-led literature discussions?	To document (a) the participants' problematic responses, (b) problematic interactions, (c) what caused these problems, and (d) difficulties the participants encountered during the discussions.	Discussion videotapes Researcher logs The transcripts of the interviews	(a) Offering illogical arguments, expressing biased opinions (b) Teasing, quarrelling, intending to control discussion topics, losing patience (c) Academic status, social relationships with other group members, personalities (d) Struggling to understand the text, struggling with a more student-centered discussion format
How does the researcher facilitate the participants' discussions?	To describe the ways the researcher assisted	Discussion videotapes Researcher logs	Offering preparatory instruction, explicit modeling, asking follow-up questions,

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Research questions	Purposes	Data resources	Tentative codes
	the students' participation in discussion.		offering information, monitoring the participants' behaviors, challenging the participants' ideas, helping clarify the participants' meaning, restating the question, creating opportunities for low-achieving participants to voice their ideas

**Translating.** Videotapes were first transcribed in Chinese. After firm categories and sub-categories were defined and checked, related data were translated into English. When translating, I conveyed the sense of the original, but did not do word-for-word (literal translation) from Chinese to English. The following are two examples of translation (Table 4).

Table 4

*Translation Examples*

The participant's original utterance	Literal translation	The sense of the original
汪姐他們家很窮。住在廢墟裡。	Wanda' family was poor. Living in the ruins of the building.	Wanda's family was poor [so] they lived in the ruins of the building.
像是槍。她可能藏不合法的東西在她的頭巾下。	Such as a gun. She may hide an illegal item under her scarf.	She may hide an illegal item such as a gun under her scarf.

**Validity**

According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000), validity refers to “the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences researchers make based on the data they collect” (p. 169). Triangulation probably is the most well-known strategy for increasing the

validity of findings (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation involves multiple data sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Denzin, 1978). In this study, multiple data sources, including videotapes, researcher logs, the participants' notes, and interviews with the participants, provided me with a variety of perspectives for comparison and multiple perceptions of data. Moreover, in my research logs, I kept my reflections on data analysis, ethical dilemmas, and conflicts. According to Patton (2002), reflexivity "reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one's own perspective" (p. 65). My self-reflections reminded me of how my subjectivity and cultural differences affected the way I interpreted the participants' talk and behaviors.

## Chapter 4

### What Are Features of the Participants' Literature Discussions?

The study aimed to investigate the interactions and conversations of a group of six fourth graders who participated in student-led literature discussions in an out-of-classroom context. The participants read and discussed eleven books, including two novels and nine picture books, over a period of eighteen weeks, between September 2 and December 29, 2010. They met with the researcher twice a week at the Shuang-Cheng Elementary School for a total of thirty-four discussion sessions.

The data that contributed to the analysis presented in the following chapters include the transcripts of the videotaped literature discussions and the participant interviews, the researcher's logs, and the participants' notes. In this chapter, the findings specific to features of the participants' literature discussions are presented.

Since the participants had no experience of operating student-led literature discussion, the discussions, during the first four weeks, were led by the researcher. In this period of time, the researcher introduced and modeled the discussion and reading comprehension strategies. When the participants became more familiar with running student-led literature discussions, the responsibility was gradually released from the researcher to the participants. The discussions during the last fourteen weeks of the 18-week study were operated by the participants themselves. The findings presented in chapters 4-7 were based on the data collected during this period, which were taken from sessions that were regarded as student-led literature discussions.

To answer the first research question: What are features of the participants' literature discussions?, five themes were identified: (a) personal connections to life and learning, (b)

drawing on textual elements in response, (c) intertextuality in response, (d) verifying and clarifying through text, and (e) producing unpredictable talk.

[abbreviation and conventions used for dialogue: Li: Lin Ji: Jian Ch: Chen Co: Chou  
R: Research (): research's comment (...): sentences omitted ...: pause in speech]

### **Personal Connections to Life and Learning**

According to Rosenblatt (1985), reading is a transactional process. Readers draw on a repertoire of linguistic and life experiences to construct meaning of the text. Readers make connections with a text by using a variety of resources to display how they make sense of the text. Readers' previous experiences, knowledge, emotions, and understandings significantly affect how they construct the meaning of the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). In this study, the making personal connection strategy triggered a variety of discussions. Through making connections with texts, the participants initiated topics that were meaningful to them and extended their understanding of the texts. During the first phase of the study, the participants were given an opportunity to discuss a picture book titled *A Liar* (Hsiao, 2006). In these discussions, I found that they were able to freely connect their personal lives to the text. They frequently shared life experiences relevant to what they were reading. To fuel the discussions, the participants were taught to connect a text to other areas such as prior knowledge and mass media during the preparatory phase. They employed the making connections strategy to construct meaning, initiate topics, and raise questions that were meaningful or relevant to them.

In this section, I focus on what personal connections the literature stimulated and the participants' purposes for using these connections. Through coding the transcripts, two types of connections frequently adopted by the participants were identified: making connections to (a) personal life and (b) other learning experiences in school. Table 5 demonstrates descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each type of connection.

Table 5

*Personal Connections to Life and Learning Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Connecting to personal life	Connecting to one's life experiences, home culture, and family.	Lo: My grandfather was a fortune teller. Jian: My family is dedicated to Taoism. Lin: I miss my mother so much.	52
Connecting to other learning experiences in school	Connecting to other academic subjects.	Chou: The science teacher mentioned a food chain. It shows how each living thing gets its food.	22

**Connecting to personal life.** The participants frequently drew on their personal lives to construct meaning of the text. They referred to life experiences, family members, and home culture. Text-to-self connections had different functions in the discussions. Some connections served to make sense of the story. One participant's personal connection might help another better understand the text or resolve his/her doubt. Some connections were made when the participants aimed to share their emotions, thoughts, reflections, and attitudes. They took an aesthetic stance to respond to a text. Many discussion topics were initiated through text-to-personal life connections.

**Connecting to life experience.** When the participants were given opportunities to initiate topics or make sense of the text, they often got ideas from their life experiences. Lin, who usually made the fewest contributions, made an increased number of contributions by drawing on her life experiences. The following excerpt is from a discussion in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998). While the participants discussed Uncle Jed's services, Chen noticed that in an

illustration, Uncle Jed put some soap around Jean's father's mouth and he wondered about Uncle Jed's purpose for doing so. Lin resolved Chen's doubt with her personal experience.

1. Ch: Why did Uncle Jed put some soap around the mouth of Jean's father? Page 8.
2. Wu: To shave his beard.
3. Lo: I don't think so. Jean's father would inhale soap foam.
4. Wu: Uncle Jed was a professional. He put soap around Jean's father's mouth carefully.
5. Co: I disagree with Wu.
6. Wu: Tell me your reason. Why do you disagree with me? (turned his head to Chou)
7. Co: Uncle Jed was a barber. Mmmm...He...he cut customers' hair only. He didn't shave their beard.
8. Lo: Yes. He cut customers' hair only.
9. Li: I disagree. Once my father brought me to a barbershop, I saw...saw the barber cutting my father's and...and shaving his beard. He put soap foam around my father's mouth carefully so my father didn't...didn't inhale that thing. Uncle Jed was going to shave Jean's father's beard.

The conversation above was initiated by Chen's question about Uncle Jed's purpose for using soap. Wu responded to Chen's question immediately, saying Uncle Jed was going to shave Jean's father (Turn 2). However, both Chou and Lo were opposed to Wu's idea, arguing that Uncle Jed cut customers' hair only (Turns 3, 5, 7, 8). Later, Lin joined the discussion by expressing her disagreement with Chou and Lo's argument. She invalidated Chou and Lo's argument by drawing on her prior experience of going to a barbershop with her father (Turn 9). According to this experience, Lin asserted that Uncle Jed was going to shave Jean's father so he put soap around his mouth. Lin clarified Chen's confusion and verified Wu's idea by making a connection to her prior life experience.

Not all connections to life experiences served to create an understanding of the text. Sometimes the participants expanded the discussions by sharing their life experiences. For example, when discussing a section depicting how disappointed and angry Nan's mother was when she saw Nan's school report card in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Lo, Jian, and Chou, whose parents had high expectations of their academic performance, told the group how many drills their parents asked them to do after school, how strict their parents were, and what harsh punishment they got when they scored low marks. They also shared their own ways of coping with their emotions when being punished. Still, when discussing Libby's losing friendship in *The Honest-to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Chen, Lo, and Lin, who had problems in interpersonal relationships, shared how their friends cheated them, how they felt when they fought with their friends, and how they were reconciled after a fight.

***Connecting to family members.*** The participants often referred to their senior family members as experts. They shared information or knowledge that they gained from those family members. They respected the authority of senior family members and never doubted the information that was provided by them. For example, while the participants discussed Monkey's taking away Kim's hat in *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2008), Wu deemed that Monkey was sent by the grandpa to help Kim make a decision. Nevertheless, Chou disagreed with Wu's idea, arguing that the grandpa did not have necessary equipment for foretelling what thing was going to happen to Kim so it was impossible for him to send Monkey to help Kim. To support Chou's argument, Lo referred to her grandfather, a fortune teller, as an expert, indicating what equipment was needed for making predictions.

1. Lo: Turned out Monkey just put Kim's hat at a baluster, but not kept it. Why?
2. Wu: Perhaps...perhaps Monkey was sent by the grandpa. He wanted Monkey to help Kim cross the river. Oh, help him make a decision.

3. Li: The hat was placed at the other side of bridge. (pointed at a balustrade in the illustration) So crossing the river through this bridge was the only option.
4. Co: I disagree with Wu's idea. How did the grandpa know that Kim was going to cross the river?
5. Wu: Perhaps the grandpa was a psychic. He...he could foretell what thing was going to happen to Kim.
6. Co: But making predictions needs a crystal ball or Tarot. The grandpa didn't have [one of these things]. So I don't think he could make predictions.
7. Wu: Mmm...Maybe...maybe he put a crystal ball in his room. Have you ever been his room? (turned his head to Chou)
8. Co: (flipped the book and then showed the illustration to Wu) Look, this is his room. Do you see a crystal ball in his room? (raised his voice)
9. Lo: I agree with Chou. The grandpa had neither a crystal ball nor Tarot. I don't think he could make predictions. My grandfather was a fortune teller before. He told me that without Tarot, it was impossible for him to predict his customers' fortune.

In the above excerpt, the conversation was initiated by a question raised by Lo. The question motivated Wu to join the discussion by expressing his idea, indicating that Monkey, sent by the grandpa, aimed to help Kim make a decision (Turn 2). Wu's idea was supported by Lin (Turn 3). The focus of the discussion switched after Chou asked Wu a challenging question, wondering how the grandpa knew that Kim was going to cross the river (Turn 4). Responding to Chou's question, Wu speculated that the grandpa was a psychic (Turn 5). However, Chou disagreed with Wu's idea, arguing that the grandpa did not have necessary equipment for making predictions. To verify his argument, Chou searched for evidence from the illustration (Turns 6, 8). To support Chou's argument, Lo told the group what equipment was needed for making predictions. Her information was verified by the fact that her grandfather was a fortune teller (Turn 9). Lo mentioned her family members frequently in the discussions. When referring to a family member as an expert, she often told the group the family member's profession before

sharing the information that she got from her/him. By doing so, she let her peers know that the information she offered was verified by an authority.

When connecting the text to their family members, the participants sometimes aimed to share their feelings about the member they just mentioned. This triggered more emotional responses. For example, when the participants discussed appropriate timing for doing or saying something in *The Honest-to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Lo told the group how embarrassed she was when her younger brother shouted “I want to pee” loudly in the middle of a concert. In discussing losing family members in *Memories* (Chen, 2000), Chou, who just lost his grandmother, shared his grandmother’s memory and his sad feeling. Also, Lin, whose mother was in prison, cried and told the group that she missed her mother very much.

***Connecting to home culture.*** When making connections to home culture, the participants usually shared information about their families’ religious rites and traditions. There were cases in which they used this strategy to aid their peers who had no necessary background knowledge for comprehending the text. They used their funds of knowledge to make sense of the text. To illustrate how a participant who lacked requisite background knowledge had difficulty understanding the text, I provide an excerpt from *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006) that was referenced in the discussion.

One year, there was a terrible drought. The people of White Village placed an auspicious white “rice turtle” in front of the temple and said “Great god, please save the good people of White Village.” The people of Black Village worshiped in the temple with a sacrificial sheep and hoped god could bless the miners of Black Village with some rain. (p.12)

The excerpt above describes a Taoist ritual held by the villagers who needed the god's help badly. In the ritual, the people of White Village provided the god with an auspicious white "rice turtle" and the people of Black Village offered a sheep as a sacrificial offering. This type of Taoist ritual was completely unfamiliar to Lin, who was Christian. When the participants discussed this section, Lin asked for help in understanding the relationship between asking for the god's help and placing an auspicious white "rice turtle" in front of the temple.

1. Li: I cannot see the relationship between asking the god for rain and placing an auspicious white "rice turtle" in front of the temple. Also...also...why did the people of Black Village worship with a sacrificial black sheep? It was brutal to kill a sheep. My father told me not to hurt animals.
2. Wu: You are Christian. No wonder you don't know this.
3. Ji: My family is dedicated to Taoism. I can explain this. When Taoists need the god's help, they provide some offerings to the god. They regard a sacrificial sheep or pig as a valuable offering. But in my family, my mother usually uses fish and chicken as offerings.
4. Co: People don't always use an auspicious white "rice turtle" or a sacrificial sheep as an offering. In my family, my mother uses fruits [as an offering]. She told me that when we...when we offer the god something to eat, the god would be more willing to help us.

Worshiping with sacrificial animals is common in Taoist rituals. Lin's question, "Why did the people of Black Village worship with a sacrificial black sheep?" showed that she did not have knowledge about a Taoist ritual. She did not know that a sacrificial black sheep was an offering for the god. She merely considered killing a sacrificial black sheep cruel. Chou and Jian clarified Lin's confusion by connecting the text to their family culture and religion. They used their funds of knowledge to resolve Lin's doubt. This excerpt illustrates how two participants helped their peer who lacked necessary background knowledge comprehend the text with their home culture. This example suggests that children from culturally diverse backgrounds may have difficulty in understanding a text that is written in a manner that is beyond their schemata.

**Connecting to other learning experiences in school.** In the discussions, the participants connected the text to other academic subjects by relating knowledge they gained from other classes as well as applying what they had known when they attempted to make sense of the text or oppose/support their peers' ideas. The discussions offered the participants opportunities to apply their prior knowledge. For instance, while the participants talked about how white and black roads leading to White and Black villages in *Black Village and White Village* (Lion, 2006), Wu noticed that the roads in the illustration were narrow and wondered how people could walk on such narrow roads. Chou resolved Wu's doubt by using his prior knowledge about mathematics.

1. Wu: I cannot figure out a connection between the road's color and the village.
2. Lo: I know. Mmm...The story said the white road led to White Village and the black road led to Black Village.
3. Wu: But...but these two roads were too narrow. How could people walk on them?
4. Co: They were diminished. Like roads shown in a map. They are diminished with a scale. We learned this in math class last semester. Don't you remember we measured a lot of big things...and then...then diminished them with a scale?
5. Lo: All things are diminished in illustrations. It was impossible for the illustrator to draw these roads as large as real ones in this small piece of paper.
6. Wu: I remember we did that task. I was assigned to measure the length of the classroom.

The conversation above began with Wu's question. Lo answered his question based in the textual information (Turns 1, 2). The topic shifted when Wu asked a follow-up question to elicit further information (Turn 3). Then Chou and Lo applied knowledge about a scale they learned in math class to clarify Wu's confusion (Turns 4, 5).

Several times, the participants applied knowledge obtained from science class. For instance, when discussing why Wanda moved out from Boggins Heights in *The Hundred*

*Dresses* (Estes, 1944), Lo said, “It was pretty damp and cold on Boggins Heights. The story said so. I think her family could not stand this kind of weather anymore so they moved out.” Then Chou drew on his prior knowledge about weather gained in science class to verify Lo’s argument. He responded, “I agree. The story said that Boggins Heights was located in a hill. The science teacher said the temperature at the high latitude is much lower than that at the low latitude.” Still, when the participants discussed what methods allowed blacks to gain more crops in their tiny farms in *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998), Lo deemed that blacks could plant a lot of vegetables, fruits, and corns in their small farms. However, Jian invalidated Lo’s idea by applying prior knowledge about plant growth. She said, “In such a way, crops cannot grow well. In science class, the teacher told us that crops cannot get sufficient nutrition if they are planted intensively. Crops may die if they don’t get enough nutrition.”

In addition to applying what they had known, the participants sometimes made connections to other academic areas by relating new knowledge to prior knowledge. For example, while the participants discussed racial segregation in *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998), Chou related racial segregation to the social stratum system, knowledge he attained in history class. He said, “I think racial segregation is similar to the social stratum system. The history teacher said that Chinese emperors adopted this system during the age of monarchy. People [at that period of time] were classified into three social levels. They were separated. Nobles and plebeians attended separate schools.”

The examples above demonstrate that the participants did not simply recall what they had learned in other classes. Their cognitive functions featured higher-order thinking such as comparing, inferring, and using textual evidence. They modified their existing schemata to accommodate new information.

## Summary

According to Short (1993), “reading is an open transactive process, not a process of reading one text in isolation from life” (p. 285). In this study, the participants brought their experiences and prior knowledge to the text rather than read the text in isolation. They purposefully recalled particular information and experiences related to what they were reading. Throughout the discussions, they made various connections with the assigned texts. The findings of this study parallels what Bloome (1985) claimed—meaning is shaped by social and cultural contexts. Readers’ interpretations are grounded in their social and cultural worlds.

The participants’ sharing of personal experiences was evident throughout the discussions. Through the participants’ sharing live experiences, the group members and I better understood one another’s cultural backgrounds, lives, and families. By connecting the text to other academic subjects, the participants applied what they had known. Rather than merely memorizing knowledge they obtained in class, the participants were able to apply their prior knowledge to different situations. This finding supports Kong and Fitch’s (2002/2003) argument that literature discussions create opportunities for students to apply prior knowledge. It is important to note that it was usually high-achievers who frequently connected a text to other academic subjects. For instance, Chou, who was identified as a high-achieving student, supplied much science knowledge for his peers. He could apply science knowledge to verify his or his peers’ ideas. This may result from the fact that he read many books related to science and his greatest academic strength lay in science. In contrast with their high-achieving peers, Lin and Chen, who were low-achieving students, seldom connected a text to other academic subjects. When their peers shared knowledge they gained from other classes, Lin and Chen usually sat in silence.

## Drawing on Textual Elements in Response

Using textual elements to respond to the selected texts was another feature of the participants' discussions. They could draw on not only written texts but also illustrations. Transactional theory is generally applied to written texts, but in Anderson's (1998) view, this theory can also be applied to illustrations. She claimed that illustrations in picture books can be read in an analytical way, focusing on the analysis of art styles and techniques, and an aesthetic manner, centering on readers' interpretation. Also, Kiefer (1995) stated that illustrations in picture books evoke readers to respond to them aesthetically and allow them to create an imagery world. In this section, I discuss how the participants responded to the selected texts by utilizing written texts as well as illustrations. Through coding the transcripts, three categories emerged, including (a) relating to characters, (b) responding to illustrations, and (c) considering the author's craft. Descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category (Table 6) are presented first and each category then is described in detail.

Table 6

*Drawing on Textual Elements in Response Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Relating to characters	The participants reacted to characters and their actions in the story.	Character interaction: Wu: [If I were Kim,] I would cross the river by rowing a boat.	Character interaction: 15
		Character evaluation: Chou: Nan's grandmother was so mean to Hao.	Character evaluation: 16

(continued)

Table 6 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Responding to illustrations	The participants evaluated illustrations or expressed their feelings about illustrations.	Evaluate illustrations: Jian: Is this Miss Washington's wedding dress? It's not gorgeous at all.  Express feelings for illustrations: Jian: The illustrator used warm color. This makes me feel the story happened in spring.	Evaluate illustrations: 12  Express feelings for illustrations: 7
Considering the author's craft	Connecting to the author's use of literary devices and styles.	Lo: The author used a comma, but not an ellipsis so I don't think Libby stumbled when she told the teacher Willie's secret.	6

**Relating to characters.** While reading, the participants reacted to characters and their actions. This type of response was often from a personal level of understanding of the text. The participants' responses related to characters and their actions were categorized into two types: character evaluation and character interaction.

**Character evaluation.** Character evaluation means that the participants took an evaluative stance toward characters. They evaluated characters' actions, personalities, and motives for particular actions. Character judgments were often made when a character's actions or behaviors against the participants' beliefs, including their morals or ethics. When evaluating a character, the participants not only projected their judgments but also revealed their values and moral standards. Evaluative terms the participants adopted were diverse, including general

adjectives, slang, and popular terms. Basically, these terms were traits of characters such as arrogant, stupid, and mean. The following example demonstrates how the participants evaluated a character. When discussing a section about Kang and his mother's negative attitude toward foreign brides and New Taiwanese Immigrant children in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Chen, Chou, and Jian judged Kang's mother.

1. Ch: (banged on the table) I felt bad. How could...Kang's mother say...foreign brides don't know how to...how to teach their children and...and they just can give birth to them? My mother...my mother teaches me sometimes. She...she [Kang's mother] was arrogant. (stammered)
2. Co: I don't like Kang's mother. She was so rude and arrogant. Some foreign bribes are devoted to teaching their children. Some New Taiwanese Immigrant children behave and...and...they have good academic performance.
3. Ji: Kang and her mother seemed to regard foreign brides and their children as trash. They...they discriminated against foreign brides and their children.

In the above excerpt, the conversation began with Chen's sharing his negative feelings and his judgment about Kang's mother. His words inspired Chou and Jian to join the discussion by criticizing Kang and his mother. Chou also expressed his opinions about foreign bribes and New Taiwanese New Immigrant children. These three participants had negative comments about Kang and his mother because their behaviors were against the respective participants' values.

Evaluative terms the participants used for judging characters were varied. General adjectives were used most frequently. In the above example, the participants used two adjectives—arrogant and rude—to describe Kang's mother. In addition to general adjectives, the participants adopted slang and popular terms. In an interview conducted on December 29, 2010, the participants were asked their reasons for using slang and popular terms. Chou, Jian, and Chen indicated that popular terms and slang had unique implications, allowing them to express special meaning and feelings. Lo and Wu said that using popular terms made them feel cool and trendy.

Some participants also indicated that they got popular terms and slang from mass media and the Internet. The following are some examples in which the participants evaluated characters with slang and popular terms. In a discussion about the villagers' superstitions in *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006), Jian used slang to judge the villagers' superstitious behaviors. She said, "They are *táo kà jì kang* (means silly). To make a fortune, they need to work harder. Worshipping the god is useless." When discussing gender stereotypes in *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), Lin judged Stephanie's male classmates who wore a ponytail by using a slang term. She said, "Those male students who wore a ponytail are *níang pào* (means sissy). They had better behave the way men should be. Otherwise, they will be teased." Moreover, when discussing Xin's dedication to fixing watches and neglecting his family in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Chou judged Xin's behavior with a popular term that originated from the Internet. He said, "Xin fixed watches all day long and seldom talked to Hao and his children. He was a *zhái nán*. He did not care what was happening in his family." (*zhái nán* means people who do not have social life and merely devote themselves to particular things at home such as playing computer games or reading comic books. This term has a negative connotation.) "*Tái xīa*" (means ridiculous) was another popular term that the participants used often. When talking about Stephanie's classmates' shaved heads in *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), Chou noticed that the teacher had a shaved head as well; he then proceeded to judge the teacher. He said, "Hey, Look! All students in this illustration had shaved heads. This teacher had a shaved head as well. She was *tái xīa*. They were too crazy."

**Character interaction.** According to Vyas (2004), readers place themselves in particular characters' roles when analyzing their actions and intentions. This type of response suggests readers' personal involvement with characters. In the discussions, the participants frequently

made references to traits, events, or problems relevant to specific characters. This took place in a variety of ways. When they took on the role of a particular character, their statements usually began with “If I were...I would.” They expressed empathetic feelings to a character through “I feel (emotion adjectives) for...How poor (the character’s name) is.” When they suggested a character to do something, their advice usually began with “He had better...She should...” Moreover, they shared life experiences that they considered relevant to characters’ experiences and problems. Some examples of character interaction are provided as follows. In discussing Libby’s telling Ruth about her torn socks at an inappropriate moment in *The Honest-to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Jian and Lin gave Libby suggestions. Jian said, “She should not tell Ruth that there was a hole in her sock when many people were around Ruth. This made Ruth feel embarrassed. She should tell Ruth this sock thing when no one is around her.” Lin said, “Libby can tell Ruth this sock thing when they go home together. In such a way, no one else will know Ruth has a hole in her sock.” In discussing a section about Nan’s grandmother’s inappropriate behavior—slapping Hao in her face—in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Chou expressed his empathetic feeling toward Hao and Lo gave Hao a suggestion. Chou said, “How pathetic Hao was. No one in this family could help her.” Lo said, “This was a kind of domestic violence. Hao can dial 113 to report her terrible situation. Someone may help her.”

**Responding to illustrations.** As previously mentioned, illustrations provided the participants with evidence to validate their views. In addition, illustrations functioned to spark the participants to take an aesthetic stance. The participants not only expressed their thoughts about illustrations but also discussed the illustrator’s painting style. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Memories* (Chen, 2000), in which some participants expressed their thoughts about the illustrator’s work. Jian said, “Some illustrations in this book are so abstract.

Some images are vague. These abstract paintings allow me to create an imagery world.” Related to Jian’s response, Wu said, “This girl recalled her deceased mother. Perhaps she had a vague memory of something between her and her mother so the illustrator drew these pictures in an abstract, vague manner.”

There were cases in which the participants took an evaluative stance toward the illustrator’s work. They expressed what the illustrator had done well or poorly and what element in the illustration was inauthentic. In discussing Monkey’s intention in *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), for instance, Lo considered Monkey kind because he was willing to help Kim. After she expressed this thought, she judged the illustrator’s work saying, “Monkey was kind because he helped Kim solve his problem. However, in this illustration, Monkey looks so evil-minded. The illustrator did lousy work.” Moreover, when the participants discussed an illustration describing Stephanie’s classmates’ shaved heads in *Stephanie’s Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), Jian discovered an abnormality in the illustration and then criticized the illustrator. She said, “An ordinary person has ten fingers, but everyone in this illustration has eight fingers only. These people are not authentic at all.”

**Considering the author’s craft.** In this study, the participants were able to make a connection to the author’s craft such as boldface words and literary devices to determine meaning and importance in a text. For instance, while the participants talked about summer in Vietnam in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Wu brought up a question to the group, asking how Nan knew that there were hundreds of cicadas chirping together. Wu’s doubt was resolved when Jian noticed the author’s use of metaphor.

1. Wu: How did Nan know that there were hundreds of cicadas chirping together? Did he count?
2. Co: It was difficult for Nan to count cicadas [since] they hide among leaves and

branches. And...and they have natural camouflage.

3. Wu: If Nan could not count cicadas, why did he say there were *hundreds* of cicadas chirping together? (emphasized the word “hundreds”)
4. Co: I sometimes hear cicadas’ loud chirps during summer.
5. Ji: I think that is metaphor. Nan did not count. The author just wanted to express chirps of cicadas were loud.
6. R: Sounds reasonable. Why do you think so?
7. Ji: The next sentence. The author said, “The sound that cicadas make is like ten airplanes flying together.” It must be pretty loud if...if ten airplanes fly together. So...so I think the author wanted to emphasize cicadas’ chirps were loud.
8. Wu: So Nan didn’t count. That’s metaphor.

The conversation above was initiated by Wu’s questions. To respond to Wu’s question, Chou activated his prior knowledge, indicating that counting cicadas was difficult (Turn 2). However, Wu was not satisfied with Chou’s answer. He was still curious how Nan knew hundreds of cicadas were chirping together (Turn 3). Instead of answering Wu’s follow-up question, Chou shared his experience (Turn 4). Then Jian joined the discussion with her inference (Turn 5). I was curious about how Jian got her idea so I asked her to explain her idea (Turn 6). In response to my request, Jian first reread a passage to let the group know where her idea came from and then articulated her idea. At the end, Wu accepted Jian’s explanation (Turn 8). The above example demonstrates how a participant constructed the meaning of the story by connecting to the author’s craft. It is important to note that the participants were not taught to make connections to the author’s craft. According to the participants, they learned this strategy from Mr. Chen in Chinese class.

## Summary

Relating to a character was one of the ways that the participants transacted with the text. This character and plot involvement took place in two forms: character evaluation and character interaction. Character evaluation often occurred when characters' behaviors and their actions were contrary to the participants' personal standards. The participants' values and beliefs were somewhat revealed when they judged characters. This finding corresponds to Hancock's (1993) argument that literature discussions provide some insight into students' value systems when they evaluate characters and analyze their actions and behaviors. Regarding evaluative terms, general adjectives, slang, and popular terms were often adopted. The participants used popular terms and slang, which they gleaned from mass media and the Internet, to express their own particular meanings. This finding suggests that language used in mass media had an impact on the participants' language use in a classroom. In character interaction, the participants suggested what characters ought to do or not to do. Responses of this type suggest a sense of personal involvement that the participants might have in the reading process. At times, they expressed their feelings about characters. Empathetic involvement was demonstrated in this type of response. These findings suggest that the participants were active readers in literature. They took an aesthetic stance to respond to the text.

According to Anderson (1998), illustrations in picture books can be read efferently or aesthetically. In this study, the participants analyzed the illustrator's painting style and then speculated what the illustrator tried to convey through his/her work. This type of response suggests that the participants read illustrations in a more analytical way. At times, they criticized and judged the illustrator's work or expressed their emotions that illustrations evoked. Responses of this type suggest that the participants read illustrations from an aesthetic stance. This finding

is consistent with Kiefer’s (1995) statement that images in picture books are presented in a unique art form that allows readers to explore them in a variety of ways.

When interpreting a text, the participants sometimes considered the author’s literary devices and writing techniques to determine the meaning of a story. Their interpretations were influenced by text features the author adopted.

**Intertextuality in Response**

In the discussions, the participants utilized other texts frequently. The term *text* here means spoken, written, viewed, and aural texts such as movies, music, dictionaries, TV programs, and radio. Through coding the transcripts, four categories emerged, including (a) integrating previous readings, (b) connecting back to previous discussions, (c) drawing on media knowledge, and (d) integrating social events/issues into discussions. Table 7 presents descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category.

Table 7

*Intertextuality in Response Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Integrating previous readings	The participants brought their perspectives, stances, and knowledge that they obtained from previous readings to their current reading.	Chou: They wanted Libby to sense her problems by herself and apologized to them, like Snail. R: Like snail? What do you mean? Chou: <i>Snail Started It!</i> Snail sensed that he should not tease Pig and then...then he made an apology to Pig.	10

(continued)

Table 7 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Connecting back to previous discussions	The participants adopted the information and knowledge attained from previous discussions as a confirmation of what they already expressed.	Lin: Why did Hao always get carsickness? (...) Chou: In the last discussion, Chen mentioned that most Vietnamese ride a motorcycle or bicycle. Maybe Hao had no experience of riding in a car before she came to Taiwan. She got carsickness because she was not used to riding in a car.	8
Drawing on media knowledge	In trying to make sense of the text, the participants brought mass media such as TV programs and movies to the discussions.	Jian: I think Mrs. White is a noble woman. In some movies, noble women always take a handkerchief in their hands. Mrs. White does so as well.	9
Integrating social events/issues into the discussions	Connecting to events of the society and the world.	Wu: In the election held last month, some candidates were accused of bribing their voters.	12

**Integrating previous readings.** The participants often brought their perspectives, stances, and knowledge that they obtained from previous readings to their current reading. They compared and contrasted ideas between texts and characters. For instance, while the participants discussed why no one wanted to tell Libby about her problem in *The Honest-to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Chou offered an possible reason, saying Libby's classmates wanted Libby to

sense her problem on her own, like Snail. He got this idea based on a prior reading—*Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997).

1. Wu: I have a question. No one told Libby about her problem. Why?
2. Lo: (pointed at the illustration) Libby's classmates were staring at Libby. They were mad with Libby's offensive words.
3. Ch: Her classmates were too mad...too mad to talk to her.
4. Co: They wanted Libby to sense her problems by herself and apologized to them, like Snail.
5. R: Like Snail? What do you mean?
6. Co: *Snail Started It*. Snail sensed that he should not tease Pig and then...and then he made an apology to Pig.
7. R: Yes. Snail sensed his inappropriate behavior.
8. Ji: But so far, Libby had no idea about her problem. She was pathetic.

In the above excerpt, the discussion was initiated by Wu's open-ended question. He wondered why nobody wanted to tell Libby about her problem—she said something at an inappropriate moment, which embarrassed her friends. Instead of answering Wu's question, Lo expressed her interpretation of the illustration (Turn 2). Responding to Wu's question, Chen and Chou offered plausible reasons (Turns 3, 4). In Chou's comment, "like Snail" confused me so I asked him to clarify his meaning (Turn 5). Chou first mentioned the title of the book to let the group know that "Snail" was one of the characters in that book and then explained why he had such an idea (Turn 6). The participants read *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997) during the eighth week of the study. It was a picture book depicting the character, Snail, who set off a chain of negative comments when he told Pig that she was fat. In the end, Snail sensed his inappropriate behavior so he apologized to Pig. Chou got his idea from this plot.

The following is another example from a discussion of *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997), in which the group discussed why Pig did not get mad after Snail teased her. In response to this question, Chou believed that Pig wanted to be herself so she did not care about Snail's teasing. Chou's interpretation was based on a previous reading— *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996).

1. Lo: I cannot believe Snail's teasing didn't cause Pig's bad emotion. She was still happy.
2. Wu: Pig liked her chunky body. She didn't care about Snail's jeer at all.
3. Co: I agree. The story said, "I like being round and big." and "I'm just the right shape for rolling in the mud." Like Stephanie, Pig wanted to be herself.
4. Lo: But it is pretty hard to ignore someone's taunt.

In the above excerpt, the discussion was initiated by Lo's thought about Pig's attitude toward Snail's taunt. In response to Lo's thought, Wu came up with a plausible reason explaining why Pig did not get mad about Snail's teasing (Turn 2). Later, Chou reread the text to verify Wu's idea and then told the group his idea (Turn 3). Actually, Chou's idea came from a former reading—*Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), a picture book about Stephanie, who was determined to have a hairdo more outrageous than the day before and ignored her classmates' teasing. Chou compared Pig and Stephanie's personalities and deemed that they had similar traits.

The above examples illustrate that the participants related ideas from the current reading to those from previous readings. They focused on specific similarities between two books.

**Connecting back to previous discussions.** As the study went on, more and more information and knowledge were provided during the discussions. The participants were able to use the information and knowledge attained from previous discussions as a confirmation of what they already expressed. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Snail Started It* (Reider,

1997), in which the participants argued about whether the fox should be blamed for capturing Rabbit. Jian thought that the fox should not be blamed for capturing Rabbit since capturing animals was the fox's nature. She used prior knowledge about a food chain, offered by Chou in a former discussion, to verify her argument.

1. Wu: I think...I think Pig misjudged Rabbit. Rabbit was not a coward.
2. R: Why do you think so?
3. Wu: Rabbit's enemy was the fox. Thus, she should be very cautious in case the fox caught her. [This was why] Rabbit always hid among the trees.
4. Ch: This was all the fox's fault. Rabbit is a protected animal. The fox should not capture this type of animal.
5. Ji: I disagree. Chou mentioned a food chain in last discussion. In a food chain, animals cannot...make their own food so...so...they must eat plants and other animals. [To live], the fox must capture other animals to eat. [Also], Rabbit was not a protected animal.
6. Lo: I agree with Jian. The fox must capture other animals to eat. How do you get the idea that Rabbit is a protected animal? The story doesn't mention this.

(Chen did not respond to Lo's question.)

In the excerpt above, the conversation was initiated by Wu's judgment on Pig. Since Wu did not tell the group why he made such a judgment in detail, I asked a probing question: "Why do you think so?", forcing Wu to elaborate on his thoughts (Turns 2, 3). The topic switched when Chen brought his thought to the discussion. He declared that the fox should not capture Rabbit since she was a protected animal (Turn 4). However, Jian disagreed with Chen's idea, arguing that the fox's capturing other animals was his nature. She applied prior knowledge about a food chain that she gained from the last discussion to verify her argument (Turn 5). Then Lo expressed her agreement with Jian's argument by repeating her word.

The participants sometimes employed the information obtained from earlier discussions as a clue to make sense of the story. For instance, when the group was trying to figure out why Hao always got carsickness in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Chou adopted the information—most Vietnamese ride a motorcycle or a bicycle—provided by Chen in a prior discussion to explain Hao’s carsickness. He said:

In the last discussion, Chen mentioned that most Vietnamese ride a motorcycle or a bicycle. Maybe Hao had no experience of riding in a car before she came to Taiwan. She got carsickness because she was not used to riding in a car.

**Drawing on media knowledge.** In trying to make sense of the text, at times, the participants brought mass media such as TV programs and movies to the discussions. They reorganized and rearticulated sources they got from mass media to mediate each other’s comprehension as well as to expand their own knowledge. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009). In this discussion, Chen shared his life in Vietnam and mentioned that he slept in a hammock. The word “hammock” confused Lin so she asked for help in understanding it. Lo then used the cartoon—*SpongeBob*, a popular animated television series—to help Lin understand the meaning of the word.

1. Ch: In Vietnam, it...it was very hot. But...but I didn’t have ice cream to eat. Oh! I slept in a special bed. It was called a hammock.
2. Co: You slept in a hammock? (a surprised tone) I saw people lying down in hammocks at the beach.
3. Li: A hammock? What is that? (Co and Lin’s talk overlapped.)
4. Lo: I know. A hammock is bed made of canvas or...or netted cord.
5. Li: A bed made of canvas? (Her tone suggested that she still had no idea what a hammock was.)
6. Lo: You don’t know that? Have you ever watched *SpongeBob*? A hammock is the

thing...the thing that Mr. Krabs hangs between two pillars as his bed.

7. Li: Oh! That thing is called a hammock.

In this example, the discussion began with Chen's sharing about his life in Vietnam. In his talk, he mentioned that he slept in a hammock. However, Lin was confused about what a hammock was so she sought help in understanding its meaning (Turn 3). Then Lo explained the meaning of the word to Lin, but her explanation did not allow Lin to comprehend the meaning (Turns 4, 5). As a result, Lo explained the word again by using the cartoon *SpongeBob* as a reference (Turn 6). It turned out that Lin understood the meaning of the word (Turn 7). This excerpt exemplified a participant's use of mass media as a reference to help a peer in understanding an unknown word.

**Integrating social events/issues into the discussions.** Short (1997) claimed that literature can be used as a way to critique the world, especially related to social and cultural issues. In this study, the participants were able to connect the text to social events or issues when story events were relevant to particular social events or issues. To deepen their understanding of these social issues, I asked them thought-provoking questions, challenged their ideas, and clarified their misunderstanding. Through thoughtful, critical discussions, the participants learned to think critically, explore particular social issues deeply, and understand their peers' different perspectives. Examples about the participants' integrating social events/issues are provided as follow.

The participants were able to use social events to validate their ideas or arguments. For instance, in discussing racial segregation and social inequality in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998), the participants mentioned two systems—the hereditary system and the social stratum system—which caused social inequality during the age of monarchy. When Chou judged

that the hereditary system was bad, Wu then indicated that the electoral system was better since capable, decent people could be elected to run the government. However, Lo disagreed with Wu's argument, arguing that not every governor elected by citizens was decent. She then took the former president Shui-Bian Chen, who took bribes and was sentenced eleven years in prison, as an example. Lo made a connection to a current social event to verify her argument.

1. Co: I think racial segregation is similar to the social stratum system. The history teacher said that Chinese emperors adopted this system during the age of monarchy. (...)
2. Lo: During the age of monarchy, [Chinese] emperors were not elected by citizens. They used the hereditary system. The history teacher mentioned this.
3. Ji: After an emperor passed away, his eldest son became a new emperor.
4. Co: This system was not good. If his eldest son was incapable, he had no ability to rule the country.
5. Wu: I agree. The electoral system is better. Capable, decent people are elected [to run the government]. Many dynasties were overthrown because of incapable emperors. [For example], the Ming dynasty was overthrown by...by...
6. R. Mongolians.
7. Lo: But citizens don't always elect capable, decent people. Some [governors] are indecent, like the former president Shui-Bian Chen. He was sent to jail for taking bribes Monday.
8. Co: He deserved it.

In the beginning of the conversation, Chou talked about the social stratum system that was adopted by Chinese emperors during the age of monarchy. Chou's talk motivated Lo to mention another system—the hereditary system—adopted by Chinese emperors (Turn 2). Then Jian jumped into the conversation by explaining the meaning of the hereditary system (Turn 3). Later, Chou commented on the hereditary system, indicating that this system allowed incapable emperors to run the country (Turn 4). Wu then offered an example to support Chou's argument.

He also indicated that the electoral system was better (Turn 5). However, Lo considered the electoral system not perfect because some indecent people may at times be elected. To validate her argument, Lo mentioned Shui-Bian Chen, the former president who was sent to prison because of taking bribes (Turn 7). Shui-Bian Chen was accused of taking bribes and was sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment. The news about his conviction was repeatedly reported through the news media in the week this discussion occurred. Lo made a connection to this current social event to verify her argument. This example suggests that Lo was aware of what was happening in society. She used a current social event as a reference to support her argument.

The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944) in which the participants interpreted Maddie's intentions of looking at Peggy during a study period. When Wu told the group that Maddie was looking at Peggy amorously, Chou immediately judged that Maddie and Peggy were lesbians. The participants then turned to discuss a social issue—homosexuality. After Lo indicated that teasing gays may contribute to some tragedies, Jian validated Lo's thought by drawing on a social event about a gay man's committing suicide because of his peers' teasing.

1. Li: Maddie took a peek at Peggy. (pointed at the illustration) She seemed to want to say something to Maddie.
2. Ch: I think she...she just did not want to study, so...so she turned to look at Peggy.
3. Wu: Based on the way Maddie looked at Peggy, Maddie was looking at Peggy amorously. (giggled)
4. Co: Oh! You meant they were lesbians. Homosexuality is sin. It should be forbidden.
5. Wu: Hey! I didn't say that. That is not my meaning. You misunderstand. (raised his voice)
6. Co: But you said Maddie was looking Peggy amorously. This indicates that Maddie had a crush on Peggy.

7. R: Looking at someone amorously has various indications. Chou, you just said that homosexuality is sin and it should be forbidden. Why do you think?
8. Co: Mmm...(a 5-second pause) I don't know. Gays are abnormal. Many people say so.
9. Li: What is the meaning of gay?
10. Wu: I know...A man...A man who loves a man, but not a woman is called a gay.
11. Lo: Many people don't like gays. They tease gays. Teasing gays may cause some tragedies. I think people are very...they are unique.
12. Li: So they are teased because they love men?
13. Ji: I think so. Several days ago, the news reported that a gay man committed suicide because he was mocked by his classmates.
14. Lo: Last night, the news reported that a gay wedding was held in Japan. The male bride wore a wedding dress.
15. Wu: So gays can get married?
16. Lo: I don't know. Probably.

In the above excerpt, the discussion began with Lin's sharing her interpretation of the illustration. Lin's interpretation motivated Chen and Wu to share their own interpretations (Turns 2, 3). Building on Wu's idea, Chou deemed that Maddie and Peggy were lesbians. He also expressed his view about homosexuality (Turn 4). Later, Wu retorted to Chou, saying that Chou misunderstood his meaning (Turn 5). Wu's raising his voice and the word "Hey!" suggested that he was mad about Chou's misunderstanding. After Chou explained why he considered Maddie and Peggy lesbians, I asked him to explain his view on homosexuality that he expressed earlier (Turns 6, 7). He thought for a few seconds and told the group that he got the thought from other people. It turned out that he did not provide any reasons for his thought (Turn 8). Later, Lin sought help in understanding a word "gay", which was brought to the discussion by Chou (Turn 9). Wu then helped clarify its meaning (Turn 10). After Wu finished his explanation, Lo joined

the discussion by expressing her critical thought about gay people and Jian drew on a social event occurring in Taiwanese's society to validate Lo's thought (Turns 11, 13). Jian's connecting to a social event inspired Lo to tell the group about another social event about gay people that occurred in Japan (Turn 14). At the end, Wu asked Lo a follow-up question to get more information about the event, but Lo could not provide an answer for him (Turns 15, 16). In this discussion, through text-to-world connections, the participants had an opportunity to explore the issue of homosexuality. Their thoughts about gay people allowed their peers to better understand this issue.

To deepen the participants' understanding of social issues or events, I sometimes asked them thought-provoking questions and challenged their ideas. Some critical talk emerged through this type of discussions. For instance, the participants were concerned with the issue of gender. Topics like gender stereotypes and gender inequality were explored several times. In the following example, the participants discussed gender inequality when reading a section describing Hao's heavy workload which was requested by Nan's grandmother in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009). In this discussion, I prompted the participants to think why Nan's grandmother did not ask Nan's father to do chores.

1. Co: The work that Nan's grandmother asked Hao to do was too much. The grandmother was mean.
2. Wu: Hao was the grandmother's daughter-in-law, but not a slave. She should give Hao a break.
3. R: Why didn't the grandmother ask her son to do chores?
4. Lo: Because he was a cripple.
5. Wu: She probably considered that doing chores is women's job.
6. Ji: I agree. My grandmother always asks my mother to do this, to do that. She never asks my father to do chores.

7. Lo: My mother has a full-time job, but she also has to do all chores after work. My father never helps. It's so unfair.
8. Ji: My mother does all chores as well. My father never does chores after work. My mother has complained thousand times. Why don't men have to do chores?
9. Wu: Maybe your fathers make more money than your mothers do.
10. Ji: [If so], it's still unfair. My mother's workload is heavy. She usually comes home late.
11. Co: It's so unfair. Women's status is still inferior to men's.

The above conversation began with Chou's negative judgment about Nan's grandmother, who asked Hao to do many chores a day. Chou's talk motivated Wu to join the discussion by expressing his thought about Nan's grandmother and giving her a suggestion (Turn 2). Then the topic shifted when I asked a thought-provoking question, wondering why the grandmother did not ask her son to do chores (Turn 3). Responding to my question, Lo provided a possible reason based on the textual information and Wu brought an assumption to the group, namely, that doing chores is a woman's job (Turns 4, 5). His talk inspired Jian and Lo to challenge this assumption and to share information about their families with regard to doing chores (Turns 6, 7, 8). Lo straightforwardly pointed out that it was unfair for her mother to do all chores after work. Later, Wu brought up a plausible reason explaining why Lo and Jian's fathers did not share chores. Nonetheless, Lo did not accept Wu's idea, arguing that her mother's workload was heavy (Turns 9, 10). At the end, Chou concluded that women's status was still inferior to men's (Turn 11). The participants' talk in this example suggested that they were aware of gender inequality and sensed that both men and women should do household chores. Also, they were actively engaged in higher-order thinking, including taking an evaluative stance (Turn 1), speculating (Turns 4, 5, 9), and thinking critically (Turns 7, 11).

## Summary

Rosenblatt (1995) claimed that when taking an aesthetic stance toward reading, readers turn their attention to their experiences from which to respond to a text. In this study, the participants constructed meaning of the text by drawing on various sources. They had the ability to make sense of the text through intertextual connections. They considered other elements and thoughts beyond the text. In the discussions, the participants sometimes related story events to social events or social issues. By doing so, their discussion topics became broader. They were able to use certain social events as references to support their own or their peers' arguments. Even though they sometimes struggled with comprehending certain social events and issues, they did not avoid discussing them. These findings suggest that the participants were concerned about society. Also, this type of discussion offered them opportunities to examine social events and issues deeply and critically and to hear different perspectives on the same event. As Soares (2009) stated, literature discussions are forums in which students learn to reason analytically and think critically. When discussing a particular social issue/event, the participants listened to one another's perspectives, expressed their critical thoughts, and challenged their peers' assumptions. They were critically literate people who reflected on what was wrong in society. The discussions that focused on social issues provided a forum for the participants to consider different points of view and to engage in a higher level of thinking. When the study continued, the participants gained more experience with readings and discussions. They were able to utilize previous readings to gain a better understanding of what they were reading and compared details between the current story and the earlier readings. These story links triggered intricate associations that were rooted in recall of details in different texts. In addition, they drew on the information gained from previous discussions to construct meaning of the current story or verify their arguments.

These findings suggest that what the participants took away from previous readings and discussions had an impact on how they interpreted the current reading. In responding to a text, the participants also adopted sources that they attained from mass media. Rather than passively accepting information conveyed by mass media, they were able to reorganize and rearticulate the information. These findings corresponds to Dong et al.'s (2008) study in which Chinese students, in Collaborative Reasoning discussions, were able to use information gained from media sources to verify their arguments.

### **Verifying and Clarifying through Text**

The participants did not always agree with their peers' ideas. They challenged their peers frequently. To validate their own views, they could search evidence from a variety of sources such as texts. At times, the participants brought misunderstandings to the discussion. Their peers could help clarify misunderstandings by returning to the text to find more detailed information. In this section, I center on how the participants (a) sought evidence to verify their ideas and (b) searched for clarification through text. Table 8 presents descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category.

Table 8

*Verifying and Clarifying through Text Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Seeking evidence to verify	To verify their arguments, the participants found evidence from written language or illustrations.	Wu: I don't think so. In the story...Page 18...The doctor said Jean needed an operation. If she got flu, she just needed to take some medicine, but not an operation.	31

(continued)

Table 8 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Searching for understanding and clarification	When more information or clarification was needed, the participants re-read the text to get more detailed information.	Lo: Why did Maddie keep thinking of Wanda? Chen: On page 42, it said that Wanda was absent for several days. Maddie wondered what happened to her.	28

**Seeking evidence to verify.** When they needed evidence to validate their ideas, the participants were able to look for evidence from the book, including illustrations and written texts. These transactions often occurred when they explored story events and characters. For instance, when the group discussed why Jean's mother did not allow Uncle Jed to cut Jean's hair in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998), Chou found evidence from an illustration to verify his idea—Jean's hair was short—and Wu searched for support from another illustration to invalidate Lo's argument—Uncle was old.

1. Ch: Why did Jean's mother not allow Uncle Jed to cut Jean's hair?
2. Wu: I have the same doubt.
3. R: Having an idea about this?
4. Co: I think Jean's hair was pretty short so she didn't need a haircut. Look at this illustration. (pointed at the illustration) Her hair was short.
5. Ji: Perhaps...Mmm...Uncle Jed was a lousy barber so Jean's mother was afraid that he would hurt Jean's scalp.
6. Wu: I disagree. Uncle Jed was the only barber in that village.
7. R: Do you mean since Uncle Jed was the only barber in that village, he must have a professional haircut skill?

8. Wu: Yes. Because...(interrupted by Lo)
9. Lo: I disagree. Even though Uncle Jed had a professional haircut skill, he was pretty old. He may have poor eyesight. He may hurt Jean's scalp [due to his poor eyesight].
10. Wu: But Uncle Jed doesn't look old in this illustration. Look, he had black hair, but not gray hair. I think Uncle Jed still can offer haircut service.

In the above example, Chen came up with a question, asking why Jean's mother did not allow Uncle Jed to cut Jean's hair (Turn 1). The question motivated Chou to join the discussion by offering a plausible reason, which was verified by the illustration (Turn 4). In response to Chen's question, Jian provided another plausible explanation (Turn 5). However, Wu disagreed with her idea, arguing that Uncle Jed was the only barber in that village (Turn 6). Since Wu's argument was unclear, I helped him clarify his meaning (Turn 7). Later, when Wu tried to articulate his thought, Lo took the floor away from him (Turns 8, 9). Lo expressed her disagreement with Wu's idea, arguing that although Uncle Jed was skilled in cutting hair, he was old and his poor eyesight may not allow him to cut Jean's hair (Turn 9). However, Wu disagreed with Lo's argument. He searched for support from the illustration to invalidate Lo's argument (Turn 10).

The following is another excerpt from a discussion about Jean's sickness in the same story. In this example, Wu used textual information to verify his arguments and invalidate those of his peers'.

1. Li: What kind of illness do you think Jean had?
2. Co: Maybe a heart attack.
3. R: Does a heart attack cause a fever? The story said Jean had fever.
4. Wu: A heart attack doesn't cause fever. And...If one has a heart attack, [s/he] should be sent to a hospital immediately. Otherwise [s/he] will die soon. But...but Jean... (flipped the book) She didn't die after a long travel. "traveled about twenty miles...by a wagon" (retold the text) So I don't think Jean had a heart attack.

5. Ji: Maybe scarlet fever.
6. Co: She probably just got flu.
7. Wu: I don't think so. In the story...(flipped the book)...Page 18...the doctor said that Jean needed an operation. If she got flu, she just needed to take medicine, but not an operation. This is common sense.
8. Lo: She probably suffered from a terrible rare disease that caused high fever. [To cure it], an operation was needed.
9. Co: Probably. I agree.

In this example, Lin opened up the discussion by asking what kind of illness Jean had. Responding to Lin's question, Chou told the group his idea (Turn 2). Considering Chou's idea unreasonable, I asked him a challenging question (Turn 3). Then Wu jumped into the discussion by responding to my question. He indicated that Jean did not have a heart attack by referring to the textual information in the story and applying his prior knowledge (Turn 4). Since Chou's idea was invalidated, Jian and Chou then offered two other diseases that could cause high fever (Turns 5, 6). However, Wu disproved Chou's idea again by drawing on his prior knowledge and the textual information in the story (Turn 7). At the end, Lo brought up her idea, which satisfied Chou (Turns 8, 9). The other group members seemed to agree with Lo's idea because no further refutation was provided. In this example, Wu went back to the text twice to find evidence to verify his arguments and invalidate Chou's ideas. He retold the story to prove to his peers that his arguments had validity (Turns 4, 7).

The examples above demonstrate that the participants had transactions with a text by using evidence in the text to validate their views or stances. Since the participants relied heavily on illustrations, most of the time, they tried to find support from them. At times, the participants needed to draw on other resources such as life experiences and prior knowledge to validate their interpretations because substantial evidence was not always available in the text.

**Searching for understanding and clarification.** The participants sometimes transacted with the text by returning to the story to find more information or clarification. They made use of every part of the text such as illustrations and titles to search for understanding. In the following example, while discussing Pig's rolling in the mud in *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997), Wu sought help to understand why Pig liked to eat mud. Lo returned to the text to find information and found that Wu misunderstood the text.

1. Wu: Why did Pig like to eat mud?
2. Co: No idea. Did the story say Pig liked to eat mud?
3. Lo: Did you ask why Pig liked to roll in the mud?
4. Wu: No. I asked why Pig liked to eat mud. (emphasized the word "eat") Somewhere in the story. It said Pig liked to eat mud.
5. Ji: Pig liked to eat mud? On which page?
6. Lo: (flipped the book) You misunderstood the story. The story didn't say so. On page 3, it said, "I'm just the right shape for rolling in the mud. I like food." (retold the text) The story didn't say Pig liked to eat mud.
7. Wu: Oh!

In the above excerpt, the discussion was initiated by Wu's question, wondering why Pig liked to eat mud. Chou responded to Wu's question immediately, but he was not able to give him an answer. Also, Chou doubted whether the story mentioned that Pig liked to eat mud (Turn 2). Later, Lo tried to make clear Wu's question (Turn 3). Lo's misunderstanding of the question forced Wu to restate his question (Turn 4). After realizing Wu's question, Lo returned to the text to look for information and found that Wu misunderstood the story. She reread the passage to let Wu know that Pig enjoyed food, but not mud (Turn 6). She thereby clarified Wu's misunderstanding.

To clarify meaning or resolve their peers' problems, the participants returned to the text looking for details. Through this process, they reread passages, found more details, and brought new insight and information to the discussions. New interpretations sometimes emerged from this process. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), in which the group discussed Lo's question: Why did Kuan ask Nan not to go to anywhere, but home after school? To answer Lo's question, Wu and Jian went back to the text to search for related information. When the participants reread passages and reconsidered details, more plausible reasons were offered.

1. Lo: Why did Kuan ask Nan not to go to anywhere, but go home after school?
2. Wu: I know the answer. Kuan wanted Nan to go home because she didn't want Hao to get mad. The story said...(flipped the book)...Wait a minute. "Nan stayed in an Internet café after school. This made Hao pretty mad." (reread the text)
3. Lo: Which page?
4. Wu: 112.
5. Li: I think Kuan wanted Nan to obey Hao's request. On page 119, it said that Hao asked Nan not to stay in the Internet café after school several times.
6. Ch: Nan...Nan should pay [for using facilities] in the Internet café. I paid...I forgot how much I paid.
7. Lo: Was that a big deal? How could that irritate Hao? Maybe just NT 25 dollars per hour.
8. Ch: Maybe Hao didn't want Nan to spend Xin's hard-earned money.
9. Ji: No, it was Tang who paid Nan's user fee. (flipped the book)...Page 108. Perhaps...I think Kuan worried that this may cause a dispute someday.
10. R: You meant using Tang's money?
11. Ji: Yes.
12. R: Probably. In addition to the money issue and Hao's wrath, any other reasons?

(Chou, Lin, and Lo flipped the book.)

13. Co: I got one. Page 110. It said that Nan stayed in the Internet café until midnight. It was dangerous to linger there late. Kuan worried that something bad may happen to Nan so...so she asked Nan to go home after school.
14. Wu: Or maybe...maybe Kuan worried that Nan may encounter rogues there.
15. Lo: Kuan worried that bad guys in the Internet café may extort Nan.
16. Ch: I went to an Internet café once. Many people smoked there. The air...the air was bad. This would harm Nan's health.

In this example, to answer Lo's question, Wu and Lin went back to the text to get detailed information. Their ideas were based on the textual information (Turns 2, 5). Unlike Wu and Lin, Chen told the group his idea by drawing on his prior experience (Turn 6). However, Lo disagreed with Chen's idea. Her challenging question forced Chen to elaborate his idea (Turns 7, 8). Later, Jian invalidated Chen's idea by using the textual information. That is, it was Tang who paid Nan's user fee. With this textual evidence, Jian came up with a new interpretation (Turn 9). Responding to my thought-provoking question, Chou brought up a new interpretation inspired by the information in the text—Nan lingered in the Internet café late (Turn 13). Related to Chou's talk, Wu and Lo came up with two other bad things that may happen to Nan if he stayed in the Internet café late (Turns 14, 15). Last, Chen, based on his experience of visiting an Internet café, provided another plausible reason (Turn 16).

The examples above illustrate the participants' use of text for understanding and clarification. They went back to the text when specific information was needed. The elements of the text such as events and characters' actions often inspired their interpretations. Through rereading the text and reconsidering details in the text, new interpretations emerged.

### **Summary**

The participants were encouraged to construct meaning through their transactions with the text. Their interpretations were not judged right or wrong, but they should be valid and

reasonable. To validate their views and stances, the participants returned to the text to reread what characters said or did. They used illustrations as well as written language to prove to their peers that their arguments had validity. Also, through rereading passages and reconsidering story details, the participants clarified and built better understandings of the text. These findings parallels what Mill (2003) claimed that revisiting the text encourages students to reconsider details that may have been ignored or not noticed on their first reading.

### **Producing Unpredictable Talk**

In this study, the participants were given freedom to raise questions, share ideas, express opinions, and control discussion topics and turn-taking. What the participants would bring to the discussions and how they would manage the discussions were unpredictable. It was common that topics shifted several times in one discussion. In addition, the discussions did not aim to have the participants figure out one correct answer; therefore, they were encouraged to share any idea that came to their minds while they were discussing a particular topic. Consequently, they brought a variety of ideas to the group. At times, creative, jaw-dropping ideas were provided. The participants' conversation was unpredictable because their responses were built on the spot in response to one another's ideas and questions and their ideas were shaped by their diverse backgrounds. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998). Initially, the participants discussed why white people did not come to congratulate Uncle Jed on his new barbershop. At the end, they talked about the certificate of land ownership. The topics shifted several times in this discussion.

1. Li: No whites here. (pointed at the illustration) Why didn't whites congratulate Uncle Jed on his new barbershop?
2. Ji: Perhaps the barbershop was located in a black community so whites didn't want to go there.

3. Ch: Whites...whites didn't know Uncle Jed ran a barbershop since it was located in a black...black community.
4. Lo: Uncle Jed should get approval before running his barbershop, right? Who granted Uncle Jed approval?
5. Wu: Does one have to get approval before [s/he] starts a business?
6. Co: Absolutely. You should get approval from the government.
7. Ji: Otherwise your business will be forced to close.
8. Wu: I think Uncle Jed got the approval from white officers because whites were rich at that time.
9. Ji: I think because they had power.
10. Co: Maybe at that time, people didn't have to get approval before they ran businesses.
11. Lo: When did this story happen?
12. Co: During the Great Depression.
13. R: The Great Depression occurred during 1920-30. I have no idea about the business policies at that age.
14. Co: Many companies bankrupted during the Great Depression, Uncle Jed was one of the victims. He lost all his saving.
15. Wu: He lost all his savings? [If so,] who bought this land for him? He had no money.
16. Co: Uncle Jed himself. The story said so.
17. Wu: But...but you just said Uncle Jed lost all his savings, how... (interrupted by Lo)
18. Lo: The history teacher mentioned the certificate of land ownership in class.
19. R: Let's resolve Wu's doubt first. Tell us that later, please. Since Uncle Jed's money was gone, how could he buy land?
20. Ch: The story said Uncle Jed started saving all over again.
21. Wu: Really? I forgot this.
22. Co: Hou~You didn't read the story carefully.

23. Li: Yes. The story said he saved for many years to buy land and all facilities for a barbershop.
24. R: Great. We resolved Wu's doubt. Any further question? (looked at Wu)  
(Wu shook his head.)
25. R: Lo, would you please tell us about the certificate of land ownership. You mentioned this, right?
26. Lo: Did Uncle Jed get the certificate of land ownership? The history teacher said that when one buys land, s/he will get a document proving his/her ownership.
27. R: Yes, this document is called the certificate of land ownership. The certificate details everything related to the land such as its location and acreage.

In the above excerpt, the first topic was initiated by Lin's question, asking why whites did not come to congratulate Uncle Jed on his new business. Jian and Chen then provided two plausible reasons (Turns 2, 3). The second topic was raised when Lo came up with a question, inquiring who granted Uncle Jed approval for running a business. In this part (Turns 4-10), Chou and Jian joined the discussion by providing some information about getting the government's approval for running a business. Wu and Jian inferred that white officers granted approval to Uncle Jed. Also, Chou guessed that official approval may not have been necessary at that time. Inspired by Chou's word—at that time, Lo asked for help in knowing when the story happened. Her question resulted in another topic shift (Turn 11). In this part (Turns 11-14), the topic was about the Great Depression. Chou and I provided some knowledge about this historical event. Then the topic shifted again when Wu asked who bought the land for Uncle Jed (Turn 15). Chou's word—Uncle Jed lost his savings—motivated Wu to ask such a question (Turn 14). In this section (Turns 15-23), Chou, Chen, and Lin aimed to resolve Wu's doubt by drawing on the textual information. When I requested Lo to explain the certificate of land ownership, a term she mentioned earlier, the topic switched again. In this part (Turns 25-27), Lo explained the

certificate of land ownership, knowledge she gained from a history class. After Lo completed her talk, I added some detailed information about the certificate of land ownership.

The following excerpt is also from a discussion of *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998). In the beginning of the discussion, the participants discussed why Uncle Jed and Jean's grandfather had to walk 30 miles for a haircut. At the end, they talked about riding animals. In this discussion, the participants not only developed the topics into several exchanges but also offered some creative ideas.

1. Li: Why did Uncle Jed and Jean's grandfather have to go 30 miles for a haircut?
  2. R: Any idea?
  3. Lo: Because they lived in a rural area.
  4. R: So you mean there was no barbershop in that rural area?
  5. Lo: Yes. No one wanted to run a barbershop in a rural area because...because very few people lived around.
  6. Wu: I cannot believe they went 30 miles for a haircut. It must take them several hours if they walked.
  7. Co: They rode their horse, not walked. (pointed at the horse in the illustration)
  8. Lo: Maybe they rode a motorcycle. This way could save much time.
  9. R: I am not sure if motorcycles were available at that age.
  10. Co: Perhaps they rode their dogs. (pointed at the dog in the illustration)
- (All the participants laughed.)
11. Wu: Jean's grandfather rode a big dog and Uncle Jed rode a small dog. (giggled)
  12. R: Have you ever seen people riding a dog?
  13. Wu: Absolutely. A dog sled.
  14. R: A dog-sled is that people sit on a sled which is pulled by one or more dogs. People do not ride on those dogs.

15. Lo: (pointed at the chicken in the illustration) Maybe they rode a chicken.  
(All the participants laughed.)
16. Co: Impossible. A chicken has little power. How can it pull a cart?
17. Lo: Maybe Uncle Jed and Jean's grandfather got four thousand chickens and then had them pull a cart [together]. (giggled)
18. Ji: Chickens are not that smart. They may get lost.
19. R: Lo, your idea is very creative. Tell us how to have four thousand chickens pull a cart together?
20. Lo: I don't know.
21. Wu: People ride animals. Some Thai ride elephants.
22. Co: Englishmen rode horses and drove horse-drawn carriages in the past.
23. Li: Some people ride camels.
24. Co: Arabians.
25. Wu: Arabians. (Co and Wu's word overlapped.)
26. R: Not all Arabians ride camels. Some Arabians living in desert regions ride camels.
27. Co: Camels can carry heavy stuff. They don't need much water so they can survive in dry regions.

The above excerpt began with Lin's question. To Lin's question, Lo gave her feedback by providing a plausible reason (Turn 3). Since Lo's meaning was unclear, I made sure of her meaning (Turn 4). She then articulated her idea (Turn 5). The topic switched when Wu expressed his thought about Uncle Jed and the grandfather's going thirty miles for a haircut (Turn 6). In this part (Turns 6-20), the participants' talk centered on how Uncle Jed and the grandfather completed a journey of thirty miles. In the beginning, Chou and Lo brought up two transportation methods: riding a horse and a motorcycle (Turns 7, 8). Later, Chou came up with a creative idea—riding a dog (Turn 10), which amused his peers. His pointing at the dog in the

illustration suggested that his idea came from the illustration. Considering Chou's idea unfeasible, I challenged him (Turn 12). Wu then helped Chou defend his idea (Turn 13). However, I invalidated Wu's argument (Turn 14). Since Chou's idea was disproved, Lo came up with another creative idea—riding a chicken (Turn 15). Like Chou, Lo's idea came from the illustration as well because she pointed at the chicken in the illustration when she shared this idea. Nevertheless, Chou was opposed to Lo's idea, arguing that a chicken had little power (Turn 16). Lo then defended her idea after Chou challenged her (Turn 17). Even though Lo tried to persuade her peers that her idea was feasible, Jian offered another reason to disprove her idea (Turn 18). Later, I requested Lo to tell the group how one could let four thousand chickens pull a cart, but she could not come up with a suitable method (Turns 19, 20). Another topic shift arose when Wu provided information—Some Thai ride elephants, inspired by Chou and Lo's previous ideas about riding a dog and a chicken. In this part (Turns 21-27), the topic focused on riding animals. Chou also told the group why camels can survive in dry regions.

### **Summary**

The above examples feature the participants' control in topic management and turn-taking during the discussions. Their talk was unpredictable since they had freedom in taking turns to respond to their peers' responses and expressing anything that came into their minds. These findings suggest that the student-led literature discussions granted the participants more freedom to discuss any topics that were meaningful to them. Without a set of questions designed by the teacher, they could explore a variety of topics.

As mentioned earlier, the participants were able to discuss social issues and to critically evaluate characters' behaviors and actions. However, they did not always take an analytical perspective on the text. Their talk about texts sometimes was full of creative thinking, including

imaging and inventing ideas. Such creative thinking often occurred when the participants intended to solve characters' problems. They were engaged in offering a variety of creative solutions. An interesting phenomenon was that once a creative idea was provided by a participant, this creative idea usually motivated the other participants to provide other creative ideas. While Rowe (1998) found that young students' talk about books was imaginary, rather analytical, the findings of this study suggest that the participants' responses involved both imaginative and analytical thinking.

## **Chapter 5**

### **How Do the Participants Interact With One Another During the Student-Led Literature Discussions?**

To answer the second research question: How do the participants interact with one another during the student-led literature discussions?, I centered on two aspects of the discussions when reading the transcripts: peer collaboration and the participants' social interactions. A Vygostkian perspective on learning assumes that children's cognitive development can be promoted through interactions with more knowledgeable others who offer them guidance or assistance. I paid close attention to peer collaboration since I was interested in understanding how the participants negotiated meaning with their peers and how they scaffolded one another's learning and thinking in the social context created by the student-led literature discussions. In addition, I looked for the participants' social interaction patterns to understand what interaction strategies they used in these discussions. By coding the transcripts and noting examples related to peer collaboration and social interaction, three themes were identified: (a) solving problems actively, (b) learning collaboratively, and (c) offering support.

#### **Solving Problems Actively**

In this study, peer collaboration usually took place when the participants aimed to fill in gaps that the author left in the text. They were able to solve problems collaboratively. The process of problem solving usually occurred in four stages: identifying the problem, hypothesizing alternative interpretations, testing, and resolving. It is important to note that the participants' attempts at solving problems did not always go through all of these four stages. Sometimes alternative interpretations were not proposed or debated and sometimes problems were not solved. The participants' engagement in solving problems suggested that they did not

merely decode texts and arrive at a single meaning, nor did they passively accept their peers' interpretations. Table 9 demonstrates definitions and examples of each stage of problem solving.

Table 9

*Problem Solving Stages*

Problem solving stages	Descriptions	Examples
Identifying the problem	The participants raised questions because they noticed there were gaps in written texts or illustrations and they wanted to fill in those gaps.	Chou: Why did Kim's face turn yellow in this illustration?
Hypothesizing alternative interpretations	The participants generated hypotheses to explain gaps or contradictions in the text.	Wu: Kim was outside the house. Maybe sunlight made his face become yellow. Lo: The color of potatoes is light yellow. Kim probably ate too many potatoes so his face turned yellow.
Testing	The participants proposed or disproved alternate hypotheses by using the text or other sources.	Jian: Potatoes do not have carotene so they cannot make Kim's face become yellow.
Resolving	The participants determined which interpretations were acceptable.	Jian: So I think that was sunlight that made Kim's face become yellow.

**Identifying the problem.** Asking questions is one of the crucial keys to understanding texts (Kong & Fitch, 2003). In the discussions, questions were raised when the participants recognized that there were missing pieces of information or inconsistencies in the text. They were aware that there were “gaps” in the text and they wanted to fill in those gaps. Most of the problems that sparked discussions were based on the participants' recognition of discrepant details, literary elements, and text features. In a discussion in *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), for instance, Lo asked, “Why were some words printed in bold face?” This question suggested that Lo did not know the author's purpose for using boldfaced words so she sought

help for understanding this text feature. When discussing Kim's making soup for villagers in *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), Wu asked, "The whole village was burnt down. Everything was destroyed by fire. Where did Kim get ingredients for making potato soup?" Wu asked such a question because the author did not tell readers where Kim got the ingredients. There was missing information in the text.

When the participants raised questions, they did not always attempt to bridge gaps in the text. At times, their problems went beyond the text, especially when they connected characters and story events to the real world. For example, when discussing the ruin of the village in *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), Lo asked, "The whole village was burnt down. I think the school was burnt down as well. There was no school for children in this village. How did their parents solve this problem?" The participants spend eight hours in school during school days. School plays an important role in their daily lives. After she read a story plot—the whole village was burnt down, Lo deemed that the school in the village was destroyed as well and students thus could not go to school. Lo asked such a question because she connected the story event to her life. In a discussion about Dog's snooze in *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997), Wu wondered whether dogs had dreams when they slept. He asked, "People have dreams when they sleep. Does Dog also have dreams when he sleeps? What does he dream about?" In this story, the author did not mention Dog's dream. Wu raised such a question because he connected Dog to human beings. Moreover, when the group discussed a story plot—the people of Black Village placed piles of coal everywhere in the village—in *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006), Jian wondered if experts told the people of Black Village that coal would harm their health. She said, "I don't think it's a good idea that the people of Black Village placed piles of coal everywhere in the village. Coal harms people's health. Did experts warn them that coal would cause serious

respiratory problems?” In the week this discussion occurred, a mine collapsed in New Zealand. This accident was repeatedly broadcasted through TV news. Issues related to mines and miners were discussed in some TV programs. The participants and I also had a discussion about miners’ health problems and dangerous working environments. Jian had such a question because she connected a story plot to a social event.

In addition to written language, illustrations evoked the participants’ questions. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the participants paid close attention to illustrations. Illustrations allowed the participants to validate their ideas and helped them construct meaning of the text. Illustrations also triggered their queries. When discussing the students’ daily clothes in *Stephanie’s Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), for example, Chou asked, “Based on the clothes these students put on, it was summer. But why did this boy put on snow boots?” Still, while talking about Pig’s shape in *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997), Lo asked, “In this illustration, why did Pig wear high heels?”

**Hypothesizing alternative interpretations.** Once a problem was identified, the participants began to generate hypotheses to fill in gaps in the text. They usually generated more than one hypothesis to respond to a perceived problem. Speculative words like “perhaps,” “probably,” “maybe,” and “may” were often adopted in the participants’ hypotheses. Based on the analysis of the transcripts, the participants’ hypotheses fell into two categories: deduction and speculation. According to Jewell and Pratt (1999), deductions are inferences based on information implicitly or explicitly presented in the text. Speculations, on the other hand, are inferences based on the participants’ life experiences or prior knowledge. They had a high degree of plausibility in the context of the story. Examples of speculation and deduction are provided as follows.

An example of deduction came from a discussion of *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997). By drawing on textual information, Lo, Chou, and Chen generated some possible reasons for why Uncle Jed wanted to run a barbershop.

1. Li: Why did Uncle Jed want to run a barbershop? Running a barbershop would cost him a lot of money.
2. Lo: The story said Uncle Jed had to go to customers' places to give them haircuts. Maybe Uncle Jed was tired of doing so.
3. R: If he has a barbershop, he just has to wait for customers at his shop.
4. Co: Uncle Jed had to go to different areas. There were no cell phones at that age so it was hard for customers to reach Uncle Jed. If Uncle Jed has a barbershop, people can go to his barbershop to have a haircut.
5. R: Yes, he will not lose his customers.
6. Ch: Uncle Jed may get lost or...go to white communities. It took him much time to...walk...walk...from one customer's place to another.

In the above example, the participants' interpretations were based on the textual information: Uncle Jed had to go to customers' places to give them haircuts. They extended this information to generate plausible reasons.

An example of speculation came from a discussion of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), in which the participants examined possible reasons for why an apple was placed on the teacher's table. Based on their life experiences, Chen, Wu, and Lo offered the following speculations. Chen said, "Perhaps the apple was for an experiment...Students will test its sweetness. We examined the sweetness of mango and sweet potato before." Wu responded, "Our former teacher threw an eraser at the student who did not pay attention to her talk. I think...I think...maybe the teacher will throw the apple at the student who is inattentive." Lo said, "Maybe the students will sketch this apple in art class. Maybe the apple is the teacher's lunch." In this discussion, the participants' ideas were based on their life experiences.

**Testing and resolving.** After the participants identified a problem and generated some hypotheses, they utilized a variety of resources to determine which interpretations were acceptable. The participants usually validated or invalidate their peers' interpretations with personal experiences, prior knowledge, and textual evidence. In some cases, they drew on knowledge and information in previous readings. The participants often actively searched for new evidence to validate his/her own view when his/her interpretation was challenged. This process allowed them to hear different views and possibly re-evaluate their own opinions. When the participants examined their peers' interpretations, their responses usually began with "I agree/disagree with (the peer's name)...because..." and "I think/I don't think..." Most of the time, they could clearly indicate their stances and elaborate on their reasons. An example of how the participants tested their peers' hypotheses is provided. In a discussion of *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), Chou noticed that Kim rang the bell that was placed on the roof of the building. He wondered how Kim reached it.

1. Co: The bell was placed on the roof of the building. How could Kim reach it?
2. Li: Maybe Kim reached the bell by a ladder. But the ladder was not shown in this illustration.
3. Ji: The building was high. Could he get a long ladder?
4. Lo: Maybe a giant lifted Kim to the roof of the building.
5. Co: I don't think there is a giant in the world.
6. Ch: Perhaps Kim stepped on someone's shoulder and then...then...climbed up to the roof.
7. Lo: The villagers probably made a human pyramid. Kim climbed up the human pyramid and then reached the bell.
8. R: It is not easy to make a human pyramid.
9. Co: I disagree...These...these two ways are not safe. Kim may lose balance and then

fall down.

10. Lo: I think...I think...Kim probably reached the bell by a staircase. Perhaps there was a staircase inside this building.

11. Co: Probably. Using a staircase is the safest way.

In the above excerpt, the participants collaborated to figure out how Kim reached the bell that was placed on the roof of the building. A number of possible ways that allowed Kim to reach the bell were provided (Turns 2, 4, 6, 7, 9) and tested (Turns 5, 8, 10). At the end, Chou considered using a staircase to be the most plausible method of reaching the bell. In this example, Chou verbalized his confusion overtly and his peers sought possible solutions collaboratively.

When a question was generated, the participants usually provided more than one interpretation. When examining their peers' interpretations, they were aware of different levels of interpretations. In a discussion of *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), for instance, the participants wondered why Wanda quivered and closed her mouth tightly after Peggy teased her. Wu and Lin interpreted Wanda's physical reaction from a deeper level of understanding.

1. Lo: Why did Wanda quiver and close her mouth tightly after Peggy teased her?
2. Co: She probably felt cold. She just had a blue dress. She didn't have a coat. Quiver is a natural reaction when you feel cold.
3. Ch: Perhaps Wanda was used to closing her mouth tightly. I do so sometimes.
4. Wu: I disagree with Chen's interpretation. Wanda...Wanda...she closed her mouth tightly after being teased by Peggy. She...(an eleven-second pause)
5. R: Are you done?
6. Wu: She closed her mouth tightly since...since...she...she...was angry. She was humiliated.
7. Li: Wanda quivered because she was pretty furious. Peggy teased her in front of their classmates.

8. R: So you consider that feeling cold might not be a main reason?
9. Li: Yes. Anger was a main reason.
10. Lo: I agree more with Wu and Lin's interpretations. Some people shiver when they are angry. When my mother is mad at me and my brother, she closes her mouth tightly.

In the above excerpt, Chou and Chen explained Wanda's quiver and closed mouth based on common sense and personal experience. They did not take Peggy's teasing of Wanda into consideration (Turns 2, 3). However, Wu and Lin considered Peggy's teasing of Wanda important. They disputed Chou and Chen's interpretations, arguing that Peggy's teasing caused Wanda's shiver (Turns 4, 6, 7). They spurred their peers to consider other perspectives. For Lo, Wu and Lin's interpretations, which came from a deeper level of understanding of the story, were more acceptable. She also validated Wu's interpretation based on her life experience (Turn 10). This example illustrates the participants' awareness of different levels of interpretations.

The participants did not always overtly debate the validity of interpretations. In some cases, a number of plausible alternatives were generated, but none of them was tested. In a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), for example, Chen asked why the grandmother did not like fries and his peers provided some plausible reasons. Nonetheless, their interpretations were not examined.

1. Ch: The grandmother did not like fries. Why? I like fries. They are delicious.
2. Wu: Because...because...fries make people sick.
3. Co: Yes, they may cause colon cancer.
4. Li: She was probably on diet. Fries have high calories. She was obese.
5. Lo: My mother is a nurse. She told me not to eat fries often because they harm our health.
6. Wu: The news reported that in some fast food restaurants, oil for making fries is used

over and over again.

7. Ch: Maybe...maybe...fries upset the grandmother's stomach.

In the above excerpt, the participants offered some possible reasons explaining why the grandmother did not like fries, but they did not express their agreements or disagreements with their peers' interpretations. None of the reasons was examined.

Even though the participants were able to negotiate which alternatives were more acceptable, it is important to note that not all debate over alternatives resulted in a resolution. At times, the participants left the problem unresolved. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006), in which Jian noticed the people of White Village, who believed the color black would bring them bad luck, worshipped with black incense. Then the participants debated whether white incense and white candles could be substituted for black incense. It turned out that they did not figure out possible solutions to the problem.

1. Ji: Since the people of White Village didn't like black, why did they worship with black incense? Why didn't they use white incense?
2. Wu: I got a reason. Mmm...It was impossible to make white incense.
3. Co: I agree. Incense is made from either eaglewood or sandalwood. It has a dark color.
4. Ch: Since they didn't like black, maybe they could worship...worship...with white candles.
5. R: This idea might not come into the villagers' heads.
6. Lo: I disagree. Wax oil will drop to the villagers' hands. Their hands will be hurt.
7. Ch: They can put candles...candles...in candleholders. [By doing so,] wax oil will not drop to their hands.
8. Ji: It is still weird. No one worships with candles.
9. Li: But I hold a candle when I hear Mass in church.

10. Co: I disagree with Lin and Chen's ideas because the villagers worshipped in the temple, but not in church. Also...also...Taoists worship with incense.
11. Wu: The people of White Village could not avoid black in their lives.
12. Ji: I agree. They were too superstitious.

In the above excerpt, Jian opened up the discussion by asking if white incense could be substituted for black incense. To Jian's question, Wu first gave feedback, arguing that it was impossible to make white incense (Turn 2). To support Wu's argument, Chou told the group why it was impossible to make white incense by drawing on his prior knowledge (Turn 3). Later, Chen suggested that the people of White Village could worship with white candles (Turn 4). However, Lo, Jian, and Chou all disagreed with his idea. They examined Chen's idea by drawing on common sense and prior knowledge (Turns 6, 8, 10). To Lo's challenge, Chen offered a solution to the problem, affirming that his idea was feasible (Turn 7). In response to Jian's disagreement, Lin helped Chen defend his idea by using her life experience (Turn 9). No alternative was provided after Chou tested Lin and Chen's ideas. The participants ended up leaving the problem unresolved.

Most of the time, the participants were able to distinguish valid from invalid interpretations and knew the multiplicity of possible reasons. However, there were cases in which some participants were unwilling to accept their peers' interpretations, even though these interpretations were reasonable. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munsch, 1996), in which Chou noticed that there was a tree in Stephanie's house and he wondered why the tree was planted inside the house. His peers offered some interpretations and some of them were reasonable; however, Chou was reluctant to accept their interpretations. He considered their interpretations ridiculous.

1. Co: Why is there a tree in Stephanie's house? It is so weird.

2. Li: Maybe it is a Christmas tree.
3. R: Maybe. Christmas trees are placed inside people's houses.
4. Co: It is not a Christmas tree.
5. R: Why do you think so?
6. Co: Because...because...Stephanie and her mother put on summer clothes. Christmas is in winter. (pointed at Stephanie and her mother in the illustration)
7. Ji: It looks like an orchid tree. Stephanie's mother decorated the house with an orchid tree.
8. Co: There is no sunshine in the house. The orchid tree will die.
9. Lo: I disagree with you since...(The floor was taken away by Wu.)
10. Wu: This tree...this tree...is close to the window. Sunshine is available there.
11. Co: But this shade blocks most of the sunshine (pointed at the shade in the illustration).
12. Lo: Maybe Stephanie's parents want to have fresh air in the house. Trees can refresh the air.
13. Ch: Maybe it is a type of tree which needs no sunshine.
14. Co: I disagree. I still deem that this tree should not be planted inside the house. (Chou and Chen's talk overlapped.)
15. R: Why?
16. Co: Their interpretations are ridiculous. I don't want to argue this anymore.

The above discussion was initiated by Chou's question, asking why there is a tree in Stephanie's house. To Chou's question, his peers provided some possible reasons (Turns 2, 7, 12, 13). Chou invalidated Lin and Jian's interpretations by drawing on his prior knowledge (Turns 6, 8, 11), but he did not test Lo and Chen's interpretations. He considered his peers' interpretations ridiculous and insisted that the tree should not be planted inside the house (Turns 14, 16). I requested him to elaborate his thought, but he refused (Turns 15, 16). In this study, the

participants were encouraged to express disagreements with their own well-supported arguments. Nonetheless, Chou, in the example above, disagreed with Lo and Chen's ideas, but he refused to provide his reasons.

### **Summary**

In this study, the process of problem solving usually consisted of four stages: identifying the problem, hypothesizing alternative interpretations, testing, and resolving. The participants raised questions when they attempted to fill in gaps and explain contradictions in the text. The majority of questions asked by the participants were "why" questions. This type of question prompted more discussions and allowed students to gain a better understanding of texts, discover new ideas, and clarify confusion (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The process of problem solving allowed the participants to extend their thinking since answers to perceived questions were not always available in the text. To solve problems, the participants activated their prior knowledge, used life experiences, and utilized textual information and prior readings. They moved beyond reading as decoding the text. They responded to the text in a way that involved personal experiences and intertextual connections. This process is "a catalyst for learning" (Leal, 1993, p. 116). When one participant expressed his/her prior knowledge, the prior knowledge of other participants appeared to be activated. Most of the time, the participants were able to generate a number of alternate interpretations. Different interpretations helped students extend their original impressions of a text and led them to understand the text more thoroughly (Soares, 2009). Sometimes one participant's interpretation could spur his/her peers to consider other perspectives, leading to new interpretations. When they interpreted the text, the participants utilized a variety of resources, like life experiences. In other words, their interpretations were shaped by their unique backgrounds. This finding echoes Rosenblatt's transactional theory. That

is, a reader's response to the text is influenced by his/her assumptions and cultural and social background (Rosenblatt, 1995). When testing hypotheses, the participants examined their peers' interpretations with various resources such as textual information and prior knowledge. They did not always accept their peers' interpretations. They challenged their peers by expressing disagreements explicitly or by requesting further explanations for the ideas their peers presented. According to Barnes (1992), challenging is a key feature of exploratory talk. If students do not express their disagreements that can be justified with supporting reasons, they may not be led to think critically. It is important to note that not all participants were able to challenge their peers. Mostly, high-achieving students, like Chou and Lo, challenged their peers frequently. Low-achieving students, like Chen and Lin, seldom questioned his peers' ideas. Reasons for why the low-achieving students rarely became challengers will be detailed in the discussion section.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that solving problems with more capable peers collaboratively allows learners to expand their thinking and learning. In this study, the participants asked questions and collaborated to seek answers that really mattered to them. The process of problem solving encouraged them to apply prior knowledge, take risks with their interpretations, and challenge their peers' ideas. This process gave the participants opportunities to think critically and to acknowledge views they had not considered. The results of the study suggest that problem solving in the discussions not only fostered the participants' ability to obtain and respond to specific feedback about their interpretations but also promoted their cognitive development.

### **Learning Collaboratively**

Talk is a powerful tool for thinking and transmitting knowledge and information (Wollman-Bonilla, 1993). According to Leal (1993), literature discussions can help readers make sense of new information as well as deepen their understanding of texts. With one another's

support, students can clarify confusions and negotiate meaning. In this section, I focus on how the participants collaborated to solve their peers' text confusion. The participants' interactions that facilitated one another's learning and thinking were classified into four categories: (a) providing information, (b) guiding a peer's thinking, (c) building vocabulary, and (d) correcting. The following are descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category (Table 10).

Table 10

*Learning Collaboratively Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Providing information	The participants offered information that helped their peers understand unknowns in the text.	Chou: I never heard “zu shi yé” and “guan shì yin”. Who they are? Wu: guan shì yin is one of the Buddhist gods. It is said that she meditates in a position with her legs crossed.	23
Guiding a peer's thinking	The participants guided a peer's reasoning through collaboration when attempting to answer his/her follow-up or challenging questions.	Lin: Chou, why do you consider people had better wear long-sleeved clothes when they are in deserts? Chou: If you wear short-sleeved clothes, your body water would evaporate very fast. You may die if you lose a lot of body water. Wu: You may lose your life because of heat exhaustion.	6

(continued)

Table 10 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Building vocabulary	The participants gave definitions of unknown words or collaborated to figure out the meaning of unknown words.	Lin: What is geography? Wu: It is knowledge about mountains, plains, basins, and hills.	16
Correcting	The participants corrected their peers' mispronunciations, misunderstandings, and language use.	Lin: This boy is too short. His mother wants him to grow so asks him to eat more fruits. Jian: I don't think so. Fruit just provides Vitamin C. It can't help growth.	mispronunciations: 6 misunderstandings: 8 language use: 6

**Providing information.** In the first week of the study, the participants were taught to request assistance when they struggled to understand a text. When a participant sought help for understanding a text, a knowledgeable peer usually gave assistance by providing relevant information. The following excerpt is from a discussion about gods in *Black Villages and White Villages* (Liou, 2006), in which Chou requested help in understanding “guan shì yin” and “zu shi yé”. After Wu and Jian offered information to Chou about these two gods, the participants expanded the topic by providing more information about religions.

1. Co: I never heard “guan shì yin” and “zu shi yé”. Who they are?
2. Wu: “guan shì yin” is one of the Buddhist gods. Mmm...I am not that sure. But I know she meditates in a position with her legs crossed.
3. Ji: “zu shi yé” is one of the Taoist gods. He is a black-faced god. Like this. (pointed at Judge Bao in the illustration)
4. Co: Buddhism encourages people not to eat meat. When expressing their appreciation or greeting people, Buddhists put their palms together.

5. Li: I am a Christian. Christians go to church. We pray before we have meals.
6. R: There are lots of traditions and taboos in each religion.
7. Ji: I know Muslims are not allowed to eat pork. Female Muslims are asked to wear veils.
8. R: Yes. Their faces cannot be seen by men other than male family members. There are strict rules for Muslim women.
9. Co: In Buddhism, nuns and monks are not allowed to get married and eat meat. They are asked to shave their heads bald.

In the excerpt above, Chou asked for help in learning about two gods: “guan shì yin” and “zu shì yé”. Wu first offered information about “guan shì yin” and then Jian explained “zu shì yé” (Turns 2, 3). Related to Wu and Jian’s information, Chou and Lin provided information about Christianity and Buddhism (Turns 4, 5). Inspired by my statement (Turn 6), Co and Jian brought information to the group about traditions and taboos of Islam and Buddhism (Turns 7, 9). In this example, Wu and Jian used providing information as feedback for Chou’s request for understanding unknown information in the text.

Most of the time, the participants provided information for their peers when the information that allowed them to understand was unavailable in the text. However, in some cases, the participants offered information since the information provided by the text was insufficient. Consequently, the participants could not thoroughly understand the text. The following excerpt is from a discussion about blacks’ (African Americans’) financial situation during the Great Depression in *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1998), in which Lin wondered why black sharecroppers were poor. Lo, Jian, and Chou provided more information about a sharecropper for Lin to recognize why black sharecroppers lived in poverty.

1. Ch: Blacks were poor at that age since most of them were sharecroppers.
2. Li: The story said that most blacks were sharecroppers. They could sell crops they

produced. [If so,] why were they still poor?

3. Lo: The history teacher said sharecroppers paid the rent for their lands with some of the crops they produce so they didn't get *all* crops they produced. (emphasized the word "all")
4. Ji: They also had to buy seeds, pesticide, and equipment.
5. Co: Those expenses cost them a lot.

In the story, the author provided a brief description of a sharecropper. Nevertheless, the description did not allow Lin to understand why black sharecroppers were poor. To clarify Lin's confusion, Lo, Jian, and Chou offered more information about a sharecropper to help Lin recognize why black sharecroppers' financial situation was so terrible during the Great Depression (Turns 3, 4, 5).

The two examples given above illustrate that the participants were able to help their peers recognize missing information by providing relevant information.

**Guiding a peer's thinking.** In the discussions, the participants sometimes asked follow-up or challenging questions to draw out further information when negotiating the meaning of the text. There were cases in which the participants guided their peers' thinking through collaboration when they attempted to answer this type of question. The following excerpt is from a discussion about a man's writing "anti-black" on his white hat in *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006), in which Chen wondered why the man could not write down "anti-black" on his white hat with white ink. To solve Chen's doubt, some participants collaborated to guide Chen's thinking.

1. Wu: Look, this man...this man...wrote "anti-black" on his white hat with black ink. He used black ink.
2. Ch: (scratched his head) Why didn't this guy write...write...write...
3. R: Anti-black.

4. Ch: Write “anti-black” with white ink? He was from White Village.
5. Wu: Can you see words which are written with white ink in white paper?
6. Ch: I don’t know. Maybe not.
7. Co: White paper...white paper. (interrupted by Lo)
8. Lo: Words which are written with white ink cannot be seen in white paper. They should be written in black ink.
9. R: Other than white ink.
10. Ji: Chen, do you notice lead is black?
11. Ch: Yes. No white lead.
12. Co: (wrote down a word in a piece of white paper with white out) Can you see this word? (pointed at the word he just wrote)
13. Ch: A little bit hard.
14. Co: It is hard for you to see this word since it was written with white out in white paper.
15. Wu: So this man wrote “anti-black” on his white hat with black ink.

In the above example, Wu opened up the discussion by sharing his understanding of an illustration. Wu’s sharing motivated Chen to ask why the man did not use white ink to write “anti-black” on his white hat (Turn 2). Wu, Lo, and Jian then resolved Chen’s doubt collaboratively (Turns 5, 8, 10). Even though Chou’s response was interrupted by Lo (Turn 7), later on, he guided Chen’s thinking by using a helpful example (Turns 12, 14). This example demonstrates the participants guided their peer’s thinking with a high level of collaboration.

**Building vocabulary.** Some types of student-led literature discussion are operated by using discussion roles, one of which is Vocabulary Finder (Daniels, 2002). However, the participants in this study were not assigned roles so vocabulary issues occurred naturally. Since Lin suffered from dyslexia and her Chinese proficiency was low, she frequently asked for help in

understanding unknown words. In most of the cases, when a participant requested clarification for an unknown word, a knowledgeable peer explained the meaning of the unknown word directly. For instance, while the participants discussed why the teacher did not punish Kang for teasing Nan in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Wu responded, “Because Kang and his mother bribed the teacher.” Then Lin asked the meaning of the word “bribe”. Wu explained, “Bribe means...you find someone doing something illegal. This person gives you money and asks you not to tell others about his/her wrongdoing. This person bribes you.”

The participants encountered many unknown words when reading the novels *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009) and *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944). There were some cases in which no participant knew the meaning of certain words. In such a situation, the participants usually collaborated to explore the meaning of unknown words with multiple means such as text passages or radicals of Chinese characters. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), in which the participants collaborated to figure out the meaning of the word “snore” by using the text passage.

1. Wu: What is snore? Page 20, Mmm...(counted the lines) the fourth line.
2. Ch: An object? I guess.
3. Lo: Maybe it is food.
4. Co: Maybe... Wait! The story said, “Xin’s loud snore pierced the air. It woke me up from sleep.” I guess snore is a type of loud sound made by Xin.
5. Ch: Loud sound. Cough.
6. Ji: Sneeze.
7. Co: This sound woke up Hao. This sound should be very loud.
8. Ch: Laughter.
9. R: I don’t think so.

10. Lo: This sound woke up Hao...I guess snore is a type of loud sound made by Xin when he slept.
11. Ji: I guess snore is Xin's loud breathing during sleep.
12. R: You got it. Snore results from the vibrating of the soft palate.

In the example above, when Wu asked the meaning of the word “snore”, Chen and Lo first gave feedback, but their guesses were baseless (Turns 2, 3). Chou then reread the text passage to find clues, inferring that snore is a type of sound made by Xin (Turn 4). When they realized that snore is a type of sound made by human beings, Chen and Jian narrowed down their search. Their guesses centered on sounds human beings could make (Turns 5, 6, 8). Based on the text passage Chou reread, Lo deduced that Xin made this type of sound when sleeping (Turn 9). Later, Jian figured out the meaning of the word “snore” (Turn 10).

In addition to using text passages, the participants sometimes collaborated to figure out word meanings based on radicals of Chinese characters. A Chinese radical is a basic component of every Chinese character and most radicals provide hints about the meanings of words. For instance, most of the characters that consist of a radical “木” (mù, means trees) are related to trees. In the following excerpt, while the participants discussed why Maddie sat down on the granite curbstone in *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), Chou asked the meaning of the word “granite”.

1. Co: Wait. What is granite (花崗岩)?
2. Wu: I don't know. Mmm... “花” (huā) means a flower. The radical of “岩” (yán) is “石” (shí, means a stone). I guess granite is something relevant to a rock and a flower.
3. R: The radical of “崗” (gāng) is “山” (shān, means a mountain).
4. Ji: Mountain. I guess granite is something from a mountain.
5. Lo: There is a flower inside a rock.

6. Wu: The shape of rock is like a flower.
7. Co: A rock or a flower from a mountain.
8. Li: A type of flower.
9. Ch: I guess granite is...a type of rock. The chair...seemed to be made of granite.  
(stammered)
10. R: The chair? Which one? Would you please tell us more?
11. Ch: The chair...the chair...on the playground.
12. R: Great. You are right. Right, the chair on the playground was made of granite.  
Granite is a type of rock with a flower-like pattern.

In this example, when Chou asked the meaning of the word “granite”, Wu and Jian guessed its meaning based on the radicals of Chinese characters—“岩” (yán) and “崗” (gāng) (Turns 2, 4). Wu and Jian’s speculations motivated other participants to join the discussion by guessing the meaning of granite. All of their guesses centered on a flower, a rock, and a mountain (Turns 5-8). Later, Chen came up with the answer and told the group that there was a granite chair on the playground (Turns 9, 11). After this conversation ended, I asked Wu why he guessed the meaning of the unknown word based on the radicals. He said, “Mr. Chen taught us. I learned this in Chinese class.” The two examples given above illustrate that the participants could collaborate to figure out the meanings of unknown words by using different means.

**Correcting.** The participants sometimes brought misunderstandings to the discussions. At times, they mispronounced words. There were some cases in which they used inappropriate language or misused idioms. Through being corrected by their peers, the participants were able to clarify misunderstandings, use language more appropriately, and learn accurate pronunciations. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000),

in which the participants talked about why Libby felt better after she was punished by her mother. Chou described Libby's feeling with an incorrect idiom.

1. Li: How could Libby feel a lot better after she was punished? I always feel bad after I get punishment.
2. Co: Libby was not a common person. She enjoyed being punished.
3. Wu: I think that was a feeling of...a feeling of...relax...relief.
4. Lo: I agree. That was a feeling of relief. I sometimes have to tell more lies to conceal my first lie. The more lies I tell, the more worries I have.
5. Co: I think Libby may feel 否極泰來 (pǐ jí tài lái, means after a storm comes a calm) after being punished.  
  
(...)
13. R: Do you know what 否極泰來 mean?
14. Ji: This idiom seems to mean all bad or tough things are gone and good things are coming. I am not that sure.
15. R: Your explanation is right. Can you give us an example?
16. Ji: For instance...for instance...you...(an eight-second pause)
17. Lo: I got one. You study hard for midterm. After midterm...after midterm...You get good grades and are allowed to play computer games all day long.
18. R: Yes, 否極泰來 can be applied in this situation. So I don't think 否極泰來 can be used in the situation that Chou just described.

In the above example, Lin came up with a question, wondering why Libby felt a lot better after being punished by her mother. Chou, Wu, and Lo joined the discussion by providing plausible reasons (Turns 2, 3, 4). In his talk, Chou misused an idiom (Turn 5). I originally wanted to correct Chou immediately. However, considering that he usually got mad with my direct correction, I had the group clarify the meaning of 否極泰來 when the topic was completed (Turn 13). Jian gave me feedback immediately by explaining the meaning of the idiom (Turn

14). To let the group have better understanding of the idiom, I requested Jian to offer an example (Turn 15). When Jian had difficulty providing an example, Lo helped her out by telling the group in what kind of situation this idiom could be applied (Turns 16, 17).

The participants' misunderstandings sometimes surfaced through discussing a variety of topics. In the following excerpt, while the participants argued whether Xin bought Hao, his wife, from Vietnam in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Wu brought a misunderstanding—whites hired black slaves to work in cotton plants—to the discussion. He then was corrected by Chou and Lo.

1. Wu: I don't think Xin bought Hao from Vietnam.
2. R: Why?
3. Wu: Hao is a human being, but not an item. Human beings cannot be sold.
4. Ji: But whites bought black slaves from Africa. Human beings can be sold.
5. Wu: That...that...happened long time ago. Were blacks sold to whites? Whites hired black slaves to work in cotton plants.
6. Co: No. You are wrong. Blacks were sold to whites.
7. Lo: When we discussed *Uncle Jed's Barber shop*, Miss Chang told us that whites bought black slaves from Africa.
8. Wu: Really? Bought them from Africa.
9. Co: Whites bought black slaves.
10. R: Yes, that was money dealings.

In the beginning of the discussion, Wu and Jian argued whether human beings could be sold. Wu asserted that human beings could not be sold since they were not items (Turn 3). However, Jian disagreed with Wu's argument, indicating that human beings could be sold. To verify her own argument, she took black slaves as an example (Turn 4). Wu attempted to defend

his argument, but he mistakenly thought that whites hired black slaves to work in cotton plants in the past (Turn 5). Chou and Lo then corrected Wu, affirming that black slaves were sold to whites (Turns 6, 7, 9). The concept that whites bought black slaves from Africa was introduced to the participants when they discussed the book *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997). Since the participants were unfamiliar with the history of the U.S. and the selling of slaves was a new concept to them, it was easy for them to misunderstand.

In the discussions, the participants also paid attention to their peers' language use. They were sensitive to their peers' use of unacceptable terms and criticized them for using foul language. While the participants discussed how Xin could make more money to buy Hao's fight ticket in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), for instance, Wu said, "Many retarded people beg money on the street. Perhaps Xin can do the same thing." Lo was aware that Wu used an inappropriate word "retarded" and then corrected him. She said, "Hey! You should not use the word "retarded". It is rude. Using "disabled" is more appropriate."

### **Summary**

Peer collaboration in this study was characterized by the participants' willingness to offer relevant information for their peers to understand unknown information, guide the peers' thinking when they elicited further information, clarify the meanings of unknown words, and correct their peers' misunderstandings or inappropriate use of language. The participants were able to take turns to teach their peers whose understanding was impeded until they got better or more thorough understanding. The participants' learning was facilitated by more knowledgeable others in the group. This type of interaction illustrates how the participants worked within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. While previous research placed emphasis on students' learning through interactions with knowledgeable adults (e.g., Brown & Palincsar,

1989), the findings of this study suggest that peers could play a role of more knowledgeable other in the learning process. The student-led literature discussions provided opportunities for peer collaboration, in which the participants drew on their prior knowledge to facilitate their peers' learning. This finding supports Vygotsky's (1978) argument that "a child can move to a more advanced cognitive level through social interactions with more competent peers" (p. 86).

It is important to note that in this study, no one student can always serve a role of more capable other because assistance is not always offered by the same student. Low-achieving students could play a role of more capable other and high-achieving students sometimes sought help for understanding unknown information. The role of informer and help-seeker switched depending on the knowledge of each participant, the type of book, and the topic under discussion. For instance, although Chen was identified as a low-achieving student, he was able to provide a lot of information as well as resolved his peers' confusion about Vietnam when the group discussed *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009). Chou, who was identified as a high-achieving student, sometimes asked for help in understanding unknown words. This finding supports Moller's (2004/2005) argument that "Being more capable is a fluid concept, shifting over time from one context to the next, sometimes from one utterance to the next in a dialogue" (p. 422).

### **Offering Personal Support**

Offering personal support to group members was another interaction strategy that the participants used. They offered their peers support in a variety of ways, including (a) helping a peer defend ideas, (b) helping a peer get out of an embarrassing situation, (c) clarifying a peer's meaning, (d) affirming a peer's argument, and (e) giving a peer emotional support. Descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences for each category are provided as follows (Table 11).

Table 11

*Offering Support Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Helping a peer defend ideas	The participant helped a peer validate his/her argument.	R: Lin, why do you think Wanda's family moved out because of inconvenient transportation? Lin: (no response) Chou: Perhaps there was no bus service in Boggins Heights so it took Wanda much time to go to school.	15
Helping a peer get out of an embarrassing situation	The participant helped a peer who was in an embarrassing condition.	Jian: (talked to Chou) You don't listen to Lo's response carefully. You misheard Lo's words. Lo: You don't admit that you misheard my words. Lin: Yes, You don't admit that you misheard Lo's words. Wu: Hey! Don't criticize him anymore. Don't you mishear someone's words sometimes?	7
Clarifying a peer's meaning	The participant helped a peer explain his/her vague talk.	R: Why did Wanda read slowly? Co: Because she had little knowledge. R: Little knowledge? Jian: I think Chou meant Wanda knew few English vocabulary words.	10

(continued)

Table 11 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Affirming a peer's argument	The participant expressed his/her agreement with a peer's idea by saying, "I agree with (the peer's name) because..." or "Right, because..."	Chou: Even though these panthers were trained, there was still a possibility that they would attack the villagers. Jian: I agree. I heard that an animal trainer was killed by a trained whale in the SeaWorld.	121
Giving a peer emotional support	The participant comforted a peer who had negative emotions during the discussions.	Wu: (Patted Chen's shoulders.) Ignore Lo. I know what you wanted to say.	6

**Helping a peer defend ideas.** The participants challenged their peers' arguments frequently when debating over particular issues. Most of the time, the participant found evidence to validate his/her view when an argument was questioned. However, there were some cases in which the participants helped a peer defend an argument because the peer had difficulty verifying the argument with supporting evidence. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McLissack, 2000). While the participants talked about Miss Virginia's wedding dress, Wu considered Miss Virginia to be a child who would wear the wedding dress that Libby's mother made in someone else's wedding. Jian and I challenged Wu's idea, but Wu was unable to defend it immediately. After Wu was speechless for a few seconds, Chou helped him out.

1. Ji: I don't think this was Miss Virginia's wedding dress because it was not gorgeous at all. It looked like an ordinary dress. (pointed at the dress in the illustration) Why was its upper part transparent?

2. Wu: Maybe it has not been completed yet.
3. R: The upper part was made of gauze so it was transparent.
4. Ji: Also, it was too small for an adult.
5. Wu: Maybe...maybe...Miss Virginia was just a child. She would wear this wedding dress in someone else's wedding.
6. Ji: What? Wedding dresses are for brides only.
7. R: If she was just a child, why did Libby's mother call her *Miss Virginia*?
8. Ji: We call unmarried women who are over 18 "Miss XXX". My mother told me so.
9. Wu: Perhaps...perhaps...Miss Virginia...(stayed silent for 12 seconds)
10. Co: There are exceptions. Maybe Miss Virginia is a prince. Princesses are called "Miss XXX" since they were little.
11. Wu: Or maybe Miss Virginia was a celebrity's child. Girls from rich families are called "Miss XXX".
12. R: How do you know?
13. Wu: From movies.

In the above example, Jian opened up the discussion by commenting on the wedding dress shown in the illustration. Her comments motivated Wu to join the discussion with his speculation (Turn 5). Considering Wu's idea unreasonable, Jian and I challenged his idea (Turns 6, 7). To my challenging question, Wu was unable to answer immediately (Turn 9). After Wu stayed silent for a few seconds, Chou helped Wu defend his idea (Turn 10). Then Wu came up with another idea by building on Chou's statement (Turn 11). This example demonstrates that Chou paid attention to his peers' talk and was willing to help a peer when recognizing the peer had difficulty verifying his own argument. When Wu thought hard in order to verify his argument, the rest of the participants waited for his response and the discussion stalled. Without Chou's help, the discussion was unable to continue.

**Helping a peer get out of an embarrassing situation.** Teasing and criticizing peers sometimes took place in the discussions. Such type of behavior often embarrassed the participant who was teased or criticized. There were cases in which the participant helped a peer get out of an embarrassing situation. For instance, while the participants discussed why Vietnamese women wanted to marry Taiwanese men in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), Lo indicated, “Some cities in Vietnam are prosperous. Vietnamese women who live in these cities may not want to marry Taiwanese men.” Then Chou attempted to respond to Lo’s statement. Nevertheless, he misheard Lo’s words, saying, “Lo said all cities in the world were prosperous.” Chou’s mishearing irritated Lo. When Chou was criticized by all female participants, Wu helped Chou defend.

1. Li: Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men? Are Taiwanese men good?
2. Lo: Because...(interrupted by Chou)
3. Co: Vietnam is not a prosperous country. Maybe those women consider Taiwanese men rich.
4. Lo: Some cities in Vietnam are prosperous. Vietnamese women living in these cities may not want to marry Taiwanese men.
5. Co: (inaudible)
6. R: Speak slowly, please. I cannot understand your talk.
7. Co: Lo said all cities in the world were prosperous. I disagree...(interrupted by Lo)
8. Lo: What? I didn’t say that. I said some cities in Vietnam were prosperous. (raised her voice.)
9. R: Lo didn’t say all cities in the world were prosperous.
10. Co: You said many cities in the world were prosperous. Then I said that thing...that that thing.
11. Lo: Which thing? I just said some cities in Vietnam were prosperous.
12. R: Yes. That was what I heard.

13. Ji: You don't listen to Lo's response carefully. You misheard Lo's words.
14. Lo: You don't admit that you misheard my words.
15. Li: Yes, you don't admit that you misheard Lo's words.
16. Wu: Hey! (banged at the table) Don't criticize him anymore. Don't you mishear someone's words sometimes? (raised his voice)
17. R: Okay, let's go back to the discussion. We haven't solved Lin's problem. Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men?

In the above example, the discussion was initiated by Lin's open-ended question, wondering why some Vietnamese women wanted to marry Taiwanese men. In response to Lin's question, Chou provided his interpretation (Turn 2). Lo also brought up her speculation to the group, but her response was irrelevant to Lin's question (Turn 3). Then Chou attempted to express his disagreement with Lo's speculation, but in fact, he misheard Lo's words (Turns 7, 10). His mishearing made Lo pretty mad and resulted in all female participants' criticisms (Turns 13, 14, 15). When Chou was criticized by all the girls in the group, Wu spoke up, attempting to rescue him from this embarrassing situation (Turn 16).

**Clarifying a peer's meaning.** During the discussions, the participants were usually eager to express their ideas and defend themselves. They sometimes did not think deeply before speaking out. As a result, the meaning of their talk was vague. The participants were able to help a peer clarify his/her unclear talk, which confused other group members. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1994). While the participants discussed why Peggy kept teasing Wanda, Lo said, "Peggy never had *judgment lessons*." Her word—judgment lessons—confused Wu and Lin. When Lo had difficulty making her meaning clear, Chou helped her out.

1. R: Why did Peggy keep making fun of Wanda? That hurt Wanda's feeling.

2. Co: Peggy was possessed by someone's soul so she could not control herself.  
(The rest of the participants laughed after Chou said so.)
3. Ji: Peggy got a lot of fun from teasing Wanda so she could not help doing that.
4. Lo: Because Peggy never had *judgment lessons*.
5. Wu: What do you mean?
6. Li: Judgment lessons? I never heard that.
7. Lo: I meant...I meant...I...Peggy did not have...(stayed silent for about 7 seconds)
8. R: Do you mean...(interrupted by Chou)
9. Co: I guess...I guess...Lo meant no one taught Peggy morals so she didn't know teasing others was a bad thing.
10. Lo: That is close to my meaning.

In the example above, I initiated the discussion by asking the participants why Peggy kept making fun of Wanda. In response to my question, Chou and Ji brought their interpretations to the group and Chou's creative thinking amused his peers (Turns 2, 3). Later, Lo jumped into the discussion with her interpretation (Turn 4); however her term—judgment lessons—confused Wu and Lin (Turns 5, 6). Lo attempted to explain her term but she seemed to have difficulty (Turn 7). Then Chou helped Lo out by clarifying her meaning (Turn 9). Chou, in this example, listened to what Lo had said carefully and was willing to assist her in clarifying a word.

**Affirming a peer's argument.** As mentioned earlier, the participants constructed meaning of the text together and debated over particular issues frequently. They were able to generate multiple interpretations and express their arguments. When considering a peer's argument reasonable, the participants affirmed the argument with their own reasons by saying, "I agree with (the peer's name) because..." or "Right, because..." Sometimes, the participants could also offer examples to verify a peer's argument. With the peers' affirmations of agreement,

the participants' arguments became more cogent. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000). While the participants discussed whether the gown shop was run by Libby's mother, Lo brought a misunderstanding—blacks are poor—to the group. Wu and Chou then corrected Lo's misunderstanding. Later, Jian offered an example to support Chou's argument.

1. Li: Did Libby's mother run this gown shop?
2. Ji: No. Her mother was a tailor. Look, a sewing machine. (pointed at the sewing machine in the illustration)
3. Lo: She was a black. Blacks were poor. How could she run this gown shop?
4. R: Blacks were poor? How did you get this idea?
5. Lo: *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*.
6. Wu: That story happened long time ago.
7. R: During the Great Depression.
8. Wu: Libby's story didn't happen during the Great Depression. In the past time, blacks were poor. But...but...now...(interrupted by Chou)
9. Co: Not all blacks are poor now. Some blacks are rich and have power.
10. Ji: I agree. Like [President] Obama.
11. Lo: Okay, I am wrong. [President] Obama is not poor.

In the above example, the discussion was initiated by Lin's question. In response to Lin's question, Jian and Lo brought their arguments to the group (Turns 2, 3). When Lo mistakenly assumed blacks were poor and told the group that she got this idea from *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Turns 3, 5), Wu and Chou gave her corrective feedback (Turns 6, 8, 9). Later, Jian came up with an example to support Chou's argument (Turn 10). At the end, Lo admitted that she had a

misconception of blacks (Turn 11). With Jian's affirmation, Chou's argument was more convincing.

**Giving a peer emotional support.** The participants usually gave emotional support to their peers who had negative emotions by comforting them. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the participants took an aesthetic stance toward texts. Some texts aroused their pleasant memories, while some evoked their sorrowful past. In the discussions, the participants frequently shared their feelings, thoughts, and ideas that the text triggered. These aesthetic responses sometimes stirred other participants and caused strong emotions. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), in which Lo shared her thought about Wanda's misfortune, saying, "Wanda was a poor girl. She had no mother so she had to do her own laundry." Lo's response motivated other participants to share what house chores they did. Meanwhile, Lo's response stirred Lin, whose mother was in jail, and caused her emotional collapse. When Lin was sobbing, Lo and Jian comforted her.

1. Lo: Wanda was a poor girl.
2. R: Why do you think so?
3. Lo: Wanda had no mother so she had to do her own laundry. In school, she was teased by her classmates.
4. Co: My mother asks me to do laundry sometimes. My job is very easy. I put dirty clothes into the washing machine, pour detergent, and push the washing button.
5. Ch: I sweep and mop.
6. Wu: I don't do chores.
7. Ji: I don't do many chores. My mother doesn't want me to help her. I sometimes do the dishes.
8. R: Lin, how about you? Do you do chores?
9. Li: (silent and lowered her head)

10. R: What happened? Are you okay?

11. Li: I...miss...my mother. (sobbed)

(When Lin was sobbing, Lo and Jian patted her shoulders and said something to her. What they said was inaudible.)

In this example, the topic was initiated by Lo's thought about Wanda's miserable life (Turns 1, 3). Relating to Lo's response in terms of doing laundry, Chou, Chen, Wu, and Jian shared what house chores they did (Turns 4-7). Later, I invited Lin to share what house chores she did. Instead of responding to my question, Lin started sobbing because she missed her mother (Turns 8-11). Then Lo and Jian comforted Lin by patting her shoulders and talking to her.

In the discussions, the participants did not always have harmonious interactions. They sometimes teased or criticized their peers. There were some cases in which the participants became angry or felt embarrassed because of their peers' jeers or criticisms. When such an incident occurred, some participants were willing to console a peer who was teased or criticized. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009). While the participants discussed why some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men, Wu said Taiwan had convenient transportation systems. Then Chen tried to list Taiwan's transportation systems, but he stammered. Chen's stammer resulted in Lo's teasing. When Chen lowered his head and refused to retell what he had said, Wu comforted him.

1. Li: Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men? Are Taiwanese men good?

(...)

17. R: Okay, let's go back to the discussion. We haven't solved Lin's problem. Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men?

18. Ji: There are many good things in Taiwan, like delicious foods.

19. Lo: Beautiful scenery.
20. Wu: Convenient transportation systems.
21. Ch: We...have...have...buses...airports...Taipei...Taipei...Rapid...Rapid...Rapid (stammered, interrupted by Lo's giggling)
22. Lo: What are you talking about? Taipei what? Taipei Zoo? I cannot understand. (giggled)
23. R: It is fine. Take a deep breath. Can you tell us what you just said again? (Chen lowered his head and had a long face. He said nothing.)
24. Wu: You are mean. (Turned his head to Chen and patted his shoulder) Ignore Lo. I know what you wanted to say. (turned his head back ) [Taipei] Rapid Transit System.

In this discussion, the participants were supposed to discuss Lin's question: Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men? However, a quarrel occurred in the beginning of the discussion. As a result, the discussion was interrupted. After I intervened in the discussion by asking the participants to discuss Lin's question, Jian, Lo, and Wu offered some plausible reasons (Turns 18, 19, 20). Relating to Wu's response, Chen attempted to list Taiwan's transportation systems, but he could not speak smoothly (Turn 21). His stammer caused Lo's giggling (Turn 22). I asked Chen to repeat what he had said, but Chen was unwilling to do so (Turn 23). Wu noticed Chen was upset so he comforted Chen and told the group what Chen had tried to say (Turn 24). The two examples given above illustrate that the participants were willing to comfort their peers who had negative emotions.

### **Summary**

In this study, offering support for a peer was one of the interaction strategies that the participants frequently used. Their supportive behaviors demonstrated in a variety of ways. During the discussions, the participants sometimes remained silent because they had difficulty answering challenging questions or making their talk clear. Under such circumstances, the peer's

assistance such as helping a peer defend his/her argument was crucial since it allowed the discussion to be maintained. Affirming a peer's argument was another supportive behavior the participants displayed. In some cases, they supported a peer's argument with their own reasons. In other cases, they confirmed a peer's argument with examples. Affirmations of agreement made their peers' arguments more persuasive. Moreover, the participants were concerned about their peers' feelings. They comforted their peers who had negative emotions and rescued their peers from embarrassing situations. Such supportive behaviors not only helped develop a positive relationship among students (Kim, 2007) but also enabled students to establish trust (Spiegel, 2005). Trust among students in literature discussions is crucial since it allows students to be more willing to contribute to discussions and work together more constructively (Spiegel, 2005). These findings suggest that the participants were engaged in thinking and participating in the discussions. Instead of playing a role of passive listener, they paid attention to their peers' talk and were aware of what support their peers needed. These findings corresponds to Kimbell-Lopez's (1997) statement that offering support is an important element for successful discussions because it demonstrates students' desire to listen and react to what their peers have said.

## Chapter 6

### What Problems Emerge During the Student-led Literature Discussions?

A body of research on student-led literature discussion has suggested that students' reading comprehension, higher level thinking skills, and social interaction abilities can be promoted through peer collaboration (e.g., Almasi & Gambrell, 1997; Eeds & Wells, 1989). However, some studies have suggested that peer collaboration occurring in student-led literature discussion does not always lead to successful learning (e.g., Cohen, 1984; Kim, 2007). Kim (2007) stated that even though peer-led literature discussion provides opportunities for peer collaboration that facilitates students' learning, unsuccessful learning may occur since assistance provided by peers does not always fall within students' zone of proximal development. In this study, although the participants were given explicit instruction about discussion and reading comprehension strategies and discussion rules necessary for successful student-led literature discussions during the first month of the study, some problems and conflicts that led to unsuccessful collaboration emerged when they were in charge of operating the discussions. To answer the third research question: What problems emerge during the student-led literature discussions?, three themes highlighting tensions, frustration, and unsuccessful collaboration that the participants experienced during the discussions were identified: (a) problematic responses, (b) problematic social interactions, and (c) participation struggles.

#### Problematic Responses

In this study, the participants were allowed to express anything relevant to the text or the topic under discussion and to freely respond to one another's talk. However, some of their responses were problematic. In this session, I center on the participants' problematic responses,

including (a) offering irrational arguments and (b) expressing biased opinions. Table 12 presents descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category.

Table 12

*Problematic Responses Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Offering irrational arguments	The participant intentionally reasoned in an illogical way.	Lo: This boy was abusing the chicken. He was stepping on it. Wu: I don't think so. The boy was just standing behind the chicken. Chou: If so, the boy's shoe should be presented. Lo: The chicken swallowed his shoe. Don't you see this chicken has a big mouth?	14
Expressing biased opinions	The participant had stereotypical views about people from particular groups, such as women and gays.	Chou: Women are lousy drivers.	10

**Offering irrational arguments.** When constructing meaning of the text, the participants usually were able to provide evidence to verify their ideas and to tell the group why they agreed/disagreed with their peers' interpretations with logical reasons. They often displayed higher levels of thinking. Nevertheless, there were cases in which the participants defended their ideas in an irrational way. They paid little attention to whether their arguments were rational and factual. For example, when the participants discussed strengths and weaknesses of living in a

wooden house in *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), some participants were opposed to Chou's idea. Chou then defended his idea illogically.

1. Ch: In Vietnam, there are a lot of wooden houses. There are few tall buildings.
2. Li: Why? No regular houses?
3. R: You meant houses constructed with bricks and cement?
4. Li: Yes.
5. Ch: No idea. Maybe...maybe...wood is cheap and cement is expensive.
6. Li: Is living in a wooden house good?
7. Ji: It is much cooler to stay in a wooden house during summer.
8. Lo: But wooden houses are not firm.
9. Wu: I agree. They can be destroyed easily by typhoons.
10. Ch: My grandfather's wooden house is...airy...airy...since there are some cracks.
11. Lo: Cracks...I think that is not good...a weakness because rain may come into the house through cracks. The story said, "When it rained, water seeped through cracks in the roof. Water was everywhere in the house. We seemed to live in a swimming pool."
12. Co: I think that is a strength because people can shower with floodwater...rain [that comes into the house through cracks.] It is cool. Save water.
13. Wu: Rain is dirty. How is it possible for people to shower with rain?
14. Co: Rain can turn into water. People always shower with water.
15. Lo: What are you talking about? Rain is water. How can it turn into water?
16. Ji: I agree. Rain is water.
17. Co: Perhaps in Vietnam, rain is not water.
18. Lo: Nonsense. Prove it.
19. Ji: If they shower with floodwater, they may be infected by germs.

20. R: Right, if they have wounds.
21. Co: Maybe...maybe...floodwater is pretty clean in Vietnam. No germs.
22. Lo: Nonsense. Prove it. Floodwater is dirty.
23. Co: How do you know floodwater is dirty? Prove it. (banged at the table)

In the above excerpt, Chen opened up the discussion by sharing information about houses in Vietnam. Lin's question about living in a wooden house motivated some participants to join the discussion by sharing their opinions about living in a wooden house (Turns 6-11). In response to Chen's sharing about cracks in his grandfather's wooden house, Lo and Chou expressed their different views about cracks in a wooden house (Turns 11, 12). Lo, based on the textual information, stated that rain could come into the house through cracks, which was a weakness. Nonetheless, Chou thought that people could shower by using rain that seeped through cracks. In his view, this was a strength of wooden houses since people could save water. Wu, Lo, and Jian were opposed to Chou's idea with their own reasons (Turns 13, 15, 19). In response to his peers' disagreements, Chou defended his idea in an irrational way, arguing that rain was not water and floodwater was clean in Vietnam (Turns 14, 17, 21). He seemed not to consider whether his arguments were factual. Considering Chou's arguments unreasonable, Lo asked Chou to validate his arguments (Turns 18, 22). Instead of verifying his arguments, Chou asked Lo to prove that floodwater was dirty (Turn 23). Chou's reaction—banging at the table—suggested that he was angry (Turn 23). This example exemplifies a participant's irrational reasoning.

After the discussion, I had a talk with Chou in person since I wanted to know why he reasoned illogically. When being asked a question: Do you really consider that rain is not water and floodwater is pretty clean in Vietnam?, he thought for a few seconds and responded, "I know

rain is water and floodwater is dirty. Lo and Jian were opposed to my idea. I did not want to lose face...lose face so I fooled them.” To my further question: Why did you think you would lose face?, he said, “If I quit arguing or acknowledged that I was wrong, they would tease me or call me a loser. Lo sometimes did so.” Based on his responses, Chou, in the above example, intended to argue irrationally since he attempted to save face. He had a similar response in the interview conducted on December 29, 2010. When being asked about his attitude toward negotiating meaning with other group members, Chou indicated that sometimes he just wanted to win the debate rather than listened to other opinions and negotiated meaning with his peers; therefore, he tried hard to defend himself, especially when Lo disagreed with his ideas. He knew some of his arguments were ridiculous, but he still expressed them since he did not want to be a loser. Chou’s irrational reasoning in the above example echoed his statement.

**Expressing biased opinions.** When discussing cultural groups such as gays and foreign brides, some of the participants were critical. However, there were cases in which some participants brought biased opinions to the discussions. For instance, while the participants discussed why Libby used an incorrect word when telling the teacher that Willie did not have his homework in *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Chen, a New Taiwanese Immigrant child, shared a plausible reason based on his experience. However, Chou disagreed with Chen’s idea and expressed a biased opinion about New Taiwanese Immigrant children.

1. Lo: Why did Libby use an incorrect word when she told the teacher that Willie didn’t do homework?
2. Wu: This is an easy question. Because he stammered.
3. Lo: Is there a relationship between stammering and using an incorrect word?
4. Ch: Maybe Libby was nervous. When I am nervous, I use inaccurate words.
5. Co: Because you are a New Taiwanese Immigrant child, your Chinese is bad. Not

resulted from your nervousness.

6. R: Do you have evidence? Why do you think so?
7. Co: His mother is Vietnamese. She cannot speak Mandarin.
8. R: Can you prove that Chen uses inaccurate words because his mother is Vietnamese and he is a New Taiwanese Immigrant child?
9. Co: Many people say so. From TV news...Some people told me so.
10. Wu: Yes, I heard so from TV news.
11. R: Okay, even though many people say so, this doesn't mean what they say is right. You should have your own judgment, but not say what everybody says. You have no evidence to prove that Chen's use of inaccurate words results from his mother's low Chinese proficiency.

In the above example, Lo opened up the discussion by asking why Libby used an inaccurate word when talking to her teacher. Lo's question motivated Wu and Chen to join the discussion by sharing their interpretations (Turns 2, 4). Chen's interpretation was based on his own experience. To Wu's interpretation, Lo asked a follow-up question to elicit more information; however, no participant responded to it (Turn 3). In response to Chen's interpretation, Chou came up with a biased argument, indicating that Chen's use of incorrect words resulted from his identity as a New Taiwanese Immigrant child rather than nervousness (Turn 5). Considering Chou's argument controversial and biased, I asked Chou to validate it (Turns 6, 8). However, Chou could not validate his argument and told the group that his argument was from other people and TV news (Turn 9). In response to Chou's biased opinion, I suggested that he should not always follow what other people say (Turn 10).

The participants discussed gender issues several times. While some participants were aware of women's inferior status in society, some brought gender stereotypes to the discussions.

The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Hundred Dressed* (Estes, 1944). While the participants talked about dress design, Lo and Chou expressed biased opinions about women.

1. Li: Fortunately, I am not in Wanda's class. I don't like dresses so I have no idea about dress design. I like wearing pants.
2. Lo: Girls have art talent [an aesthetic sense] so they can design dresses. Boys don't have art talent [an aesthetic sense].
3. R: All boys don't have an aesthetic sense?
4. Co: Males have an aesthetic sense as well. Jason Wu designed a dress for First Lady. He came back to Taiwan from the United States several days ago.
5. Lo: Yes, he designed dresses for First Lady and Michelle [Obama].
6. Ji: Perhaps the teacher assumed boys liked mechanical things more.
7. R: If so, the teacher probably had a gender stereotype. Not every boy likes mechanical things. Jason Wu said he liked dolls when he was a little boy. Many females like mechanical things.
8. Lo: My father fixes airplanes in Taoyuan airport. He told me that there are more and more female pilots.
9. Ji: There are more and more female bus drivers.
10. Co: Women are lousy drivers.
11. R: Why do you think so? How did you get this idea?
12. Co: I read about a woman...(interrupted by Lo and Jian)
13. Lo: Women are not lousy drivers.
14. Ji: Who says so?
15. R: Let Chou finish his talk first.
16. Co: I read a report about a car bumping into a convenient store in the newspaper. The driver was a woman.
17. Lo: But most of offending drivers are men.
18. R: That woman might be a lousy driver, but this doesn't mean all women are lousy

drivers.

In this example, the conversation was initiated by Lin's sharing about her preference for clothes, which sparked a discussion about gender stereotypes. Lin's sharing inspired Lo to express her opinion about an aesthetic sense. She conveyed a stereotypical image of girls and boys (Turn 2). Considering Lo's biased opinion, I challenged her (Turn 3). Then Chou joined the discussion by expressing his disagreement with Lo's opinion. He argued that males had an aesthetic sense. His argument was validated by an example—Jason Wu, a famous male designer who designed dresses for Taiwan's First Lady and Michelle Obama (Turn 4). Relating to my talk about females' fondness for mechanical things, Lo mentioned a mechanical job that more and more women do (Turns 7, 8). In her talk, Lo told the group his father's profession first. By doing so, she let her peers know the information she offered was verified by a profession (Turn 8). In response to Jian's talk about female bus drivers, Chou came up with a biased opinion—women are lousy drivers (Turns 9, 10). He got this negative image of women from a newspaper report (Turn 16). Both Lo and Jian were opposed to Chou's opinion (Turns 13, 14). At the end, I advised Chou that he should not take a part for a whole (Turn 18). The two examples given above illustrate that the participants had biases about people from certain groups. Mass media such as newspapers and TV news were among the sources conveying these biases to the participants.

### **Summary**

During the discussions, the participants collaborated to construct meaning of the text. When facing their peers' challenging questions, most of the time, they were able to defend their ideas in a rational way. They tried hard to find evidence to verify their ideas and arguments. However, there were cases in which the participants did not pay attention to whether their

arguments were logical and factual. They argued in an illogical way. Such problematic responses often occurred among high-achieving participants, who had competitive relationships. To save face, they insisted on their illogical arguments. They did not consider their peers' ideas and were unwilling to negotiate meaning with them. As Chou responded in the interview, he believed he would become a loser if he compromised his ideas. Therefore, he tried hard to defend his ideas and did not consider his peers' opinions. Even though he was aware that his arguments were unreasonable, he did not admit that his arguments were illogical in front of his peers because he wanted to maintain a good self-image and a powerful position within the group. Lo also had a similar response in the interview, saying, "I felt Chou sometimes wanted to embarrass me so he disproved my ideas intentionally. I knew my ideas were not always right [reasonable], but I didn't want to compromise." According to Huang (1987), countries such as China, Korea, and Japan, which inherit the Confucian philosophy have a strong concept of saving face since one's face represents his/her real worth and status. Also, Ho (1976) claimed that face metaphorically means reputation and prestige. Saving face is like saving respect and dignity. The high-achieving participants tried hard to defend themselves because they intended to save their good name within the group. McMahon (1997) stated that student-led literature discussion group is a context in which students practice engaging in exploratory talk. Students are supposed to explore meaning together and create new possibilities for interpretation (Cazden, 2001). However, the findings of this study suggest that when the participants aimed to win the argument rather than compromised their opinions during negotiation of meaning, they did not value their peers' thinking, consider alternatives, or revise their own thinking. As a result, the discussions could not allow them to learn about others and themselves. As Harste, Short, and Burke stated (1998), it is through hearing others' opinions in discussions that students can gain new insights about what

they read and develop a better understanding of themselves. While some studies have reported that students' higher order thinking can be promoted through articulating their thoughts and communicating with their peers (e.g., Cazden, 2001; Soares, 2009), the findings of this study suggest that when arguing irrationally, the participants not only paid little attention to whether their arguments were reasonable but also provided few critical and analytical arguments. Consequently, the discussions might not help develop their higher-level thinking.

There were some discussions in which the participants talked about people from diverse cultural groups such as gays, foreign brides, and New Taiwanese Immigrant children. While some participants could bring critical thoughts such as criticizing gender inequality and racial discrimination to the discussions, some expressed biased opinions. Most of the biased opinions were about New Taiwanese Immigrant children. Some Taiwanese disdain New Taiwanese Immigrant children—whose fathers are Taiwanese and mothers are foreign brides—and have negative impressions of them. The most common stereotypical, negative image is that the academic achievement of such children is low because their mothers know little Chinese and provide limited assistance for their children's academic learning. This stereotypical view is usually conveyed through mass media. In fact, some studies have reported that there was no significant correlation between New Taiwanese Immigrant children's academic performance and their mothers' Chinese proficiency. For instance, in her study, Ko (2004) compared the academic achievement of Taiwanese children and New Taiwanese Immigrant children and reported that New Taiwanese Immigrant children's academic achievement was significantly influenced by their learning attitudes such as willingness to work hard. There was no significant correlation between their academic achievement and potential variables such as parents' assistance and family socioeconomic status. A similar result was found in Lai's (2009) study, which reported

that New Taiwanese Immigrant children's academic achievement was influenced by their learning habits and the availability of school resources such as assistance from teachers. Their mothers' ability in Chinese had no significant influence on their children's academic achievement. Cai (2002) stated that biases not only hurt people of cultural groups but also influence how they see themselves. During the discussions, some participants conveyed stereotypes about New Taiwanese Immigrant children. They ignored people's diversity and individuality. These stereotypical opinions may hurt the self-esteem and feelings of Chen, who was a New Taiwanese Immigrant child.

Many scholars have emphasized a teacher's ability to convey accurate information and present an authentic picture of a culture (e.g., Au & Raphael, 2000; Greenberg, 2002). The participants received information about people from diverse cultural groups through a variety of sources such as TV programs. However, some sources conveyed stereotypical images of particular people. The participants seemed to have developed biased impressions of people from certain groups and then spread these negative images to their peers during the discussions. When biased opinions were expressed by the participants, I acted as a "cultural mediator" (Diamond & Moore, 1995), clarifying their misinformation and conveying accurate information. Students may have little or no experiences with people from other groups. The teacher thus should know about multiple cultures. According to Greenberg (2002), consulting with members of cultural groups is often helpful. This allows a teacher to learn about concrete culture as well as people's values and beliefs.

### **Problematic Interactions**

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the student-led literature discussions allowed the participants to facilitate one another's learning and thinking through peer collaboration. However,

problematic interactions among the participants sometimes occurred, which decreased the effectiveness of peer collaboration. In this session, I discuss the participants' problematic interactions which resulted in unsuccessful peer collaboration, including (a) controlling the discussions, (b) teasing, (c) quarreling, and (d) losing patience. Descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of each category are provided as follows (Table 13).

Table 13

*Problematic Interactions Types, Descriptions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Controlling the discussions	The participant intended to control the discussion by cutting off the topic under discussion and abruptly raising an irrelevant one.	R: Are we done with the stick issue? Chou: We are not done, but I want to change the topic. The stick problem is not interesting.	13
Teasing	The participant intentionally irritated or made fun of other group members.	Chen: Kim is "super" [very] hesitant when he is thinking about what he should do. Chou: (laughed) <i>Super</i> hesitant? What is that? That is the way Vietnamese use.	11
Quarreling	The participant had an angry dispute with other group members.	Wu: Hou~ You don't pay attention to the discussion. Lin: Do you always pay attention to the discussions? (raised her voice) Wu: Absolutely. I am a good student. Lin: You are a good student? You were punished by Mr. Chen this morning.	11

(continued)

Table 13 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Losing patience	The participant instructed his/her peers impatiently.	Chou: Why does this dog have fur in his bottom? Wu: It is a poodle. Chou: What? I don't get it. There is no fur in my dog's bottom. Wu: Hou! (banged at the table with his book) A poodle is a kind of hairy dog. Understand? (raised his voice)	6

**Controlling the discussions.** In this study, the participants had the freedom of topic initiation and turn taking. They were supposed to move to a new topic when the old one was finished. However, there were cases in which the participants, mainly high-achieving participants, tried to control the discussions by changing the topic under discussion abruptly, especially when the topic did not interest them. In some cases, they even cut off the topics right after their peers initiated them, indicating the topics were boring or meaningless. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009). While the participants were discussing why the man, in the illustration, held a wooden stick, Chou suddenly raised an unrelated question, asking where Kim got the potatoes? He not only interrupted his peer's talk but also cut off the topic under discussion.

1. Wu: Why did this man hold a wooden stick? He probably wanted to use this stick to hit the man sitting at the top of the building.
2. R: Really?
3. Co: Was that a wooden stick? It looked like a hunting gun. Maybe he wanted to shoot his friend.

4. Ch: For the house. (Turned his head to look at me when he started to talk.)
5. R: Do you mean for building the house?
6. Ch: (nodded his head)
7. Lo: I disagree with Chen. In the previous discussion, Chou...I don't remember who said...Someone mentioned that this house was built with bricks and cement.
8. R: I remember that.
9. Ji: Maybe the man used this wooden stick for measuring. It was a big ruler.
10. Li: Maybe the man wanted to...(interrupted by Chou)
11. Co: Kim was peeling potatoes here. Where did he get the potatoes?
12. Lo: Probably from other villages.
13. Ch: Perhaps...from the farm.
14. Co: Kim probably stole them from a supermarket. (giggled)
15. R: Are we done with the stick issue?
16. Li: No. Chou interrupted me.
17. Co: We are not done, but I want to change the topic. The stick problem is not interesting.

In the above excerpt, the discussion was initiated by Wu's question, asking about the man's purpose for holding a wooden stick in his hand. In response to Wu's question, Chou, Chen, and Jian brought their interpretations to the group (Turns 3, 4, 9). Since Chen's talk was unclear, I clarified his meaning (Turn 5). Later, Lo invalidated Chen's interpretation based on a peer's idea provided in the previous discussion, indicating that the house was constructed with bricks and cement, not wood (Turn 7). When Lin attempted to express her interpretation, Chou interrupted her talk by raising a question irrelevant to the topic under discussion (Turns 10, 11). Lo and Chen then turned to respond to Chou's question (Turns 12, 13). Consequently, the stick

topic was dropped. To my inquiry, Lin told me Chou interrupted her talk and Chou confessed that he had no interest in the stick issue so he wanted to change the topic (Turns 15, 16, 17). Chou's attempt to control the discussion was demonstrated by interrupting Lin's talk (Turn 10) and cutting off the topic under discussion and then initiating a new topic in which he was interested (Turn 11). Chou's behavior in this example was consistent with Mr. Chen's description of his participation in small-group activities in class. That is, Chou often directed other group members and intended to control tasks that were supposed to be completed by all group members collaboratively.

**Teasing.** In most of the cases, the participants were teased by their peers when they said something wrong or struggled to clarify their unclear talk. Teasing not only resulted in quarrels but also evoked the participants' negative emotions. Some participants even refused to contribute after being teased. Based on the analysis of the data, it was usually the high-achieving participants who teased their peers. For example, while the participants discussed why Libby's mother wanted Libby to thread a needle in *The Honest-to Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Lin, a low-achieving student, offered an unclear idea and I wanted her to clarify it. However, she had difficulty in doing so and then she was teased by Chou, who was a high-achieving student, and Wu, whose academic performance was at the upper-middle level.

1. Ji: Why did Libby's mother want Libby to thread a needle?
2. Wu: Her mother probably...probably...was going to do another thing so she wanted Libby to help her thread a needle.
3. Co: But her mother just sat down there and talked to Libby. (pointed at Libby's mother in the illustration)
4. Ji: I agree. Her mother was not going to do something else.
5. Wu: Maybe...maybe she was busy making Miss...Miss...(flipped the book)

6. Lo: Virginia.
7. Wu: Miss Virginia's wedding dress so she wanted Libby to do her a favor.
8. R: Save her time.
9. Li: Her mother wanted to teach her a lesson with a thread and a needle.
10. R: Teach her a lesson?
11. Lo: What lesson?
12. Ji: What kind of lesson?
13. R: Can you make it clear?
14. Li: (Thought for a few seconds) I need more time to think about this.
15. R: Take your time.  
(...)
23. R: Lin, can you explain your idea now?
24. Li: (stayed silent)
25. Wu: Hey! Say something. Are you a mute? (giggled)
26. Co: A mute...a mute...she is deaf as well. (giggled)
27. R: Stop, please. Lin, maybe you can explain it a little bit and then we can help you out.
28. Li: (lowered her head) I do not want to explain it. Forget it.
29. Wu: If...if you do not want to tell us [explain your idea], do not express it. Waste our time.

In the excerpt above, Jian opened up the discussion by asking why Libby's mother wanted Libby to thread a needle. To Jian's question, Wu first gave her feedback, inferring Libby's mother was going to do something else so she wanted Libby to give her a hand (Turn 2). However, Chou invalidated Wu's interpretation based on the information shown in the

illustration and his argument was supported by Jian (Turns 3, 4). Since his first interpretation was invalidated, Wu then came up with another interpretation (Turn 7). Later, Lin jumped into the discussion with her idea, but it confused Lo, Jian, and me (Turns 9-12). When I asked Lin to clarify her idea, she requested more time to figure it out (Turns 13, 14). The discussion then kept going. After a few minutes, I asked Lin to explain her idea. However, she seemed to have difficulty in doing so because she stayed silent (Turns 23, 24). Lin's silence resulted in Wu and Chou's teasing (Turns 25, 26). I wanted to help Lin out, but she refused (Turns 27, 28). She ended up asking the group to forget her idea, which caused Wu's criticism (Turn 29). This example illustrates how Lin, a low-achieving student, was teased by two peers whose academic status was higher than hers.

After the discussion, I had a talk with Lin in person, asking why she did not want to explain her idea. She said, "I tried to...I was still thinking...Wu and Chou teased me so I do not want to explain my idea anymore. I was afraid...afraid that they would tease me again." Based on Lin's response, Wu and Chou's teasing was the main reason for why Lin refused to explain her idea. Her peers' jeer created an unfriendly atmosphere which made Lin feel uncomfortable to respond. In this example, Lin refused to explain her idea because she was afraid of continued teasing by her high-achieving peers. She did not fight back after being teased. Her reaction suggests that she positioned herself in a less powerful position within the group.

Teasing sometimes happened among high-achieving participants. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009). While the participants discussed why some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men, Wu said Taiwan had convenient transportation systems. Responding to Wu's idea, Chou said there were many airports in Taiwan. Lo then asked Chou to name Taiwan's airports. However, Chou mistakenly assumed there was a

JiLong Airport. Lo, a high-achieving student, teased Chou as soon as I corrected Chou's misinformation.

1. Li: Why do some Vietnamese women want to marry Taiwanese men? Are Taiwanese men good?  
(...)
18. Ji: There are many good things in Taiwan, like delicious foods.
19. Lo: Beautiful scenery.
20. Wu: Convenient transportation systems.  
(...)
25. Co: We have many airports.
26. Lo: Such as?
27. Co: Taipei SongShan Airport...mmm also, Taoyuan International Airport.
28. Lo: What else? You said we have *many* airports, but you just listed two [airports]. (emphasized the word "many")
29. Co: Got another one. JiLong Airport.
30. R: There is no JiLong Airport. That should be JiLong Harbor.  
(Except Chou, the rest of the participants laughed.)
31. Lo: JiLong Airport. Idiot. (giggled)  
(Chou lowered his head and had a long face.)
32. Ji: I assumed you know everything.
33. Co: No one is perfect.

In the above example, Lin opened up the discussion by raising a question, wondering why some Vietnamese women wanted to marry Taiwanese men. In response to Lin's question, Jian, Lo, and Wu offered some plausible reasons (Turns 18-20). Responding to Wu's idea about

Taiwan's transportation, Chou told the group there were many airports in Taiwan (Turn 25). Then Lo asked a follow-up question to elicit more information (Turn 26). Responding to Lo's request, Chou listed two airports (Turn 27). However, Lo was not satisfied with Chou's answers so she wanted Chou to list more airports (Turn 28). Chou thus listed one more airport (Turn 29). Since there was no JiLong Airport in Taiwan, I corrected Chou's inaccurate information, which elicited Lo's jeer (Turns 30, 31). At the end, Chou tried to save his face, saying, "No one is perfect." This example illustrates how a high-achieving participant teased another high-achieving peer who brought misinformation to the group. Unlike Lin in the previous example, Chou, in this example, defend himself—no one is perfect—after being teased. He seemed to try to save his face and powerful position within the group.

**Quarreling.** Quarrels among the participants were often triggered by their peers' criticisms, bossy manners, or disagreements. Similar to teasing, quarreling often caused the participants' negative emotions and tension within the group.

**Peers' criticisms.** As they became more familiar with discussion etiquette, the participants were able to better monitor themselves and their peers' discussion behaviors. At times, they criticized their peers when their peers acted inappropriately such as interrupting other group members' talk. These criticisms sometimes evoked disputes. For instance, when the participants discussed hostility among villagers in *Black Village and White Village* (Chang, 2009), Lin offered an idea unrelated to the topic. Wu then criticized Lin for not paying attention to the discussion and his criticism caused a quarrel between them.

1. Lo: Why did the people of these two villages have no contact with one another? What happened to them?
2. Wu: The story said the people of White Village didn't like the people of Black Village. Hostility.

3. Lo: (pointed at the girl in the illustration) But why was this girl smiling at this boy?
4. Co: They were just children. They were too young to know what happened among adults.
5. Ji: Perhaps this girl was attracted to this boy.
6. Wu: I agree with Chou. Or maybe...maybe...the girl wanted to show her friendliness.
7. Li: Hate. They hated one another.
8. Wu: What? Hate? Why...(interrupted by Lo)
9. Lo: What do you mean? Do you smile at a person you hate?
10. Li: They hated one another.
11. Co: I have no idea what you are talking about.
12. Lo: Did you answer the question...I meant the question about no contact.
13. Li: Aren't we discussing that question?
14. Lo: No.
15. Wu: Hou~You didn't pay attention to the discussion.
16. Li: Do you always pay attention to the discussion? (raised her voice)
17. Wu: Absolutely. I am a good student.
18. Li: You are a good student? You were punished by Mr. Chen this morning.  
(raised her voice)  
  
(Wu made a face to Lin.)
19. Co: It is a fact that you didn't pay attention to the discussion.

In the above example, the topic was initiated by Lo's question, wondering why the people of White Village and Black Village did not contact with one another (Turn 1). Wu gave Lo an answer based on the textual information, indicating that there was hostility between these two villages (Turn 2). However, Wu's idea contradicted the information presented in the illustration.

Therefore, Lo asked a follow-up question, wondering why the girl in White Village was smiling at the boy in Black Village (Turn 3). Lo's second question motivated Chou, Jian, and Wu to join the discussion by providing their interpretations (Turns 4, 5, 6). Later, Lin jumped into the discussion with her idea (Turn 7). However, her response was irrelevant to the topic under discussion so it confused Wu and Lo (Turns 8, 9). In response to her peers' confusion, Lin simply repeated her idea rather than clarified it (Turns 10). Later, Lo found that Lin responded to her first question, but not the second one (Turns 12, 14). Wu thus criticized Lin because she broke one of the discussion rules—paying attention to the discussion, which was a rule heavily addressed during the preparatory stage (Turn 15). Wu's criticism made Lin upset and resulted in a quarrel (Turns 16, 17, 18). After having a quarrel with Wu, Lin had a long face and contributed nothing to the discussion. I created a few opportunities for her to rejoin the discussion, but she remained silent. Lin's intended silence and long face suggest that the quarrel evoked her negative emotion and impacted her mood for making further contributions.

*Peers' bossy manners.* At times, quarrels were triggered by peers' bossy manners. For example, when the participants discussed why the houses in Black Village were shabby in *Black Village and White Village* (Chang, 2009), Chou provided an interpretation: The people of Black Village were in debt so they had no money for fancy houses. However, Lo disagreed with Chou's interpretation and argued with him aggressively. Lo's bossy manner irritated Chou and evoked a quarrel between them.

1. Co: I have a doubt. Why were the houses in Black Village so shabby?
2. Wu: I guess they liked shabby houses.
3. Ji: I agree. It is not necessary to live in beautiful houses.
4. Co: The people of Black Village were probably in debt so they had no money to buy fancy houses.

5. R: Why were they in debt?
6. Wu: You say something nonsense again.
7. Co: The villagers...they probably liked gambling.
8. R: You meant gambling losses put them in debt so they had no money for beautiful houses?
9. Co: Yes.
10. Ji: I disagree because...how could one villager's debt affect the other villagers?
11. Co: All villagers liked gambling.
12. Lo: Including children?
13. Co: Children didn't make money. They had no money for gambling.
14. Ji: But you just said *all* villagers. (emphasized the word "all")
15. Co: I meant... (interrupted by Lo)
16. Lo: I heard you said... (interrupted by Chou)
17. Co: Hey! I have not completed my talk yet. You interrupted me.
18. R: Let Chou finish his talk first.
19. Co: I meant they *probably* liked to gamble. I just made a guess. (emphasized the word "probably")
20. Wu: I disagree. If...if...the villagers gambled, the police would arrest them. But in this illustration, they were working. They were not arrested.
21. Lo: I agree. Why weren't they arrested by the police? Why? Answer me! (raised her voice and banged at the table)
22. Co: Why should I answer your question?
23. Lo: Because we are discussing.
24. Co: No, you...you...you...(interrupted by Lo)
25. Lo: Your idea is ridiculous! (high volume)

26. Co: Your argument is ridiculous! (high volume)
27. Lo: You usually say something that is nonsense! (high volume)
28. Co: You too! (high volume)
29. Wu: You should stop. They spoke too loud. Let's change the topic.
30. Ji: I agree. Let's change the topic.

In the above excerpt, the discussion was triggered by Chou's question, asking why the houses in Black Village were shabby. Chou's question motivated Wu to join the discussion by offering his interpretation, which was supported by Jian (Turns 2, 3). Later, Chou offered a plausible reason (Turn 4). Since his idea was not clear, I asked him for a clarification (Turns 5, 7). After Chou made his idea clear, Jian and Lo challenged his idea (Turns 10, 12). To Jian and Lo's challenging questions, Chou tried hard to defend his idea (Turns 11, 13, 19). Because Lo and Chou were eager to express their arguments, they interrupted each other's talk (Turns 15, 16). A dispute between Chou and Lo was evoked when Lo commanded Chou to answer her question in a bossy manner—high volume and banging at the table (Turn 21). Chou and Lo quarreled back and forth (Turns 22-28). Wu could not bear his peers' loud, hostile conversation and thus suggested the group to change the topic (Turn 29). His suggestion was supported by Jian (Turn 30). Even though the quarrel was ended by Wu's intervention, the participants did not continue to discuss the shabby house issue. In this example, the quarrel not only created tension among the participants but also let the topic drop.

*Peers' disagreements.* When constructing meaning of the text, it was common that the participants freely expressed their agreements and disagreement with their peers' interpretations. However, sometimes the participants had no tolerance for their peers' disagreements. There were cases in which the participants' disapproval of their peers' ideas triggered quarrels. For example,

while the participants discussed what Willie put in his handbag in *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Jian considered the possibility that Willie put his lunch in the handbag.

Nonetheless, Chou disagreed with her idea, which sparked a quarrel between them.

1. Lo: (pointed at the box in the illustration) I am curious about Willie's handbag. What did he put in this handbag?
2. Co: A bomb. He wanted to bomb his school.
3. R: Sounds terrible. You are kidding, right?
4. Ji: Perhaps he put some important stuff in it such as his books.
5. Wu: That was a pencil box. Mmm...he...he needed pencils and erasers in school.
6. Ji: Food. He put his lunch in it.
7. Co: I don't think so. The story...(flipped the book) (interrupted by Lo)
8. Lo: I have one more question.
9. R: Please, tell us later. Let Chou finish his talk first.
10. Co: I got it. I disagree with Jian's idea. The story said, "Peter forgot his money for Lunch." [Based on this], I think students bought foods from the cafeteria in school. They didn't have to bring their lunch to school.
11. Ji: How do you know *all* students bought lunch from the cafeteria? (emphasized the word "all") Maybe Willie didn't like school foods [foods offered by the cafeteria] so he brought his lunch to school.
12. Co: I disagree. His lunch would rot because it was not refrigerated.
13. Ji: Perhaps there was a refrigerator in school. (raised her voice)
14. Co: Even though there was a refrigerator, maybe Willie was not allowed to use it. (raised his voice)
15. Ji: I think...I think he could use it. I am right. I don't accept your argument. (high volume)
16. Co: You are...(paused for a few seconds)
17. Ji: What? Say it! (high volume)

18. Co: Are you always right?
19. Ji: Yes, I am right. You are wrong.
20. R: Calm down.

In the excerpt above, Lo came up with a question about Willie's handbag, which triggered the discussion. In response to Lo's question, Chou, Jian, Wu offered their interpretations (Turns 2-6). To Jian's interpretation—Willie put lunch in his handbag, Chou expressed his disagreement. Based on the textual information, Chou inferred that students bought lunch from the cafeteria in school so bringing lunch to school was unnecessary (Turn 10). To Chou's disagreement, Jian defended her idea, arguing that not all students bought lunch from the cafeteria (Turn 11). Chou and Jian then argued back and forth loudly (Turns 12-15). A dispute emerged when Jian insisted that her interpretation was right and she refused to accept Chou's disagreement (Turns 15-19). At the end, Jian still did not accept Chou's disagreement (Turn 19). The above example illustrates how a peer's disagreement on a subject sparked a quarrel between the participants.

According to Mr. Chen, Chou, Lo, and Jian were identified as high-achieving students and there was a rivalry among them, especially between Chou and Lo. During the discussions, their rivalry was often demonstrated by competing for the floor, teasing, criticizing each other's ideas with harsh words, and talking to each other in a bossy way. These problematic interactions contributed to some quarrels among them. Even though their quarrels were not fierce and often ended quickly through their peers' or my intervention, they destroyed a harmonious atmosphere and made the discussion group become an uncomfortable context.

**Losing patience.** As mentioned in Chapter 5, when the participants sought help for understanding unknown information in a text, their peers usually were willing to offer assistance.

Nonetheless, at times, knowledgeable participants instructed their peers impatiently. This often happened when they were asked to explain the same instruction again. Since they lost patience, their explanation and the information they provided were not detailed, which often contributed to unsuccessful facilitation. For instance, while the participants discussed whether people eat insects in *Snail Started It* (Reider, 1997), Lo brought a misunderstanding to the group—spiders are nutritious because they contain antibiotics. Lin asked the meaning of the word “antibiotics” and then Wu told her the meaning. Since Lin was still confused about the word after Wu explained it, she thus asked Wu to explain it again. However, Wu lost patience so his second explanation was not as detailed as the first one. Consequently, the word still confused Lin.

1. Lo: Gooses are supposed to eat earthworms, but not spiders. Do people eat spiders?
2. Ji: Several days ago, I watched a TV program introducing people who ate insects such as spiders, scorpions, and ants.
3. Co: I watched a similar TV program before. The program introduced weird things people ate. Some people ate new-born rats. It was disgusting.
4. Ji: I think those people had no money for food so they ate insects.
5. Ch: Are spiders nutritious?
6. Lo: Yes, spiders are nutritious because they contain antibiotics.
7. Co: But antibiotics are not nutrition.
8. Li: What are antibiotics?
9. Wu: They are something...something can kill bacteria.
10. Li: Are they ointments?
11. Wu: No, they are medical drugs...to cure bacteria, no, I mean infections.
12. Li: Cure what? Say that again. I don't understand.
13. Wu: Hou! (banged at the table with his fist) I have told you. Do you listen to me? They are medicines.

14. Li: But cure what?

(Wu said nothing further.)

In the excerpt above, the discussion was initiated by Lo's question, wondering if people eat spiders. Chou and Jian gave Lo feedback by sharing information about people eating insects and weird food (Turns 2, 3). In response to Chen's question, Lo told the group that spiders were nutritious since they had antibiotics, which was a misunderstanding (Turns 5, 6). When Lin requested a clarification for an unknown word "antibiotics", Wu joined the discussion by explaining the word to Lin (Turns 8-11). Since Lin still could not understand the meaning of the word clearly through Wu's explanation, she asked Wu to explain it again (Turn 12). However, Wu seemed reluctant. He complained and doubted whether Lin listened to him. As a result, his second explanation was not as detailed as the first one (Turn 13). Wu's complaint—Hou! I have told you—and his body language—banging at the table with his fist—suggest that he lost patience (Turn 13). Because Wu's second explanation was not detailed, Lin was still confused about the word (Turn 14). This example illustrates a participant's impatience for instructing a peer, which resulted in unsuccessful facilitation.

### **Summary**

According to Evans (1996), gender, academic status, and social class often result in equity problems in student-led literature discussion groups. In this study, there was an imbalanced power relationship between high-achieving participants—Lo, Chou, and Jian—and low-achieving participants—Chen and Lin. The participants' academic statuses influenced their opportunities for voicing opinions during the discussions. There were cases in which the participants with high academic status took away their low-achieving peers' floor by interrupting their talk. They sometimes attempted to control the discussion by cutting off a topic that did not

interest them and initiating a new one in which they were interested. They disrespected their peers and silenced their voices. While some scholars claimed that student-led literature discussion enables students' voices to be heard and valued (e.g., Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 2000), the findings of this study suggest that a student's academic status affected his/her opportunity for letting his/her voices be heard. Low-achieving participants' voices were more likely to be silenced by their high-achieving peers. It was much easier for high-achieving participants to have opportunities to voice their opinions. This finding corresponds to Wee's (2010) study in which high-achieving students assumed more group leadership roles than low-achieving students. They attempted to control discussions and tended to talk more.

In addition to controlling topics and interrupting their peers' talk, high-achieving participants' power was demonstrated through teasing other group members. As Cherland (1994) claimed, teasing is a way for students to exhibit their power and establish dominance. Even though the participants were told that teasing was unacceptable, at times, they intentionally made fun of their peers when their peers said something wrong or had difficulty in clarifying talk. Teasing often resulted in quarrels and had a negative influence on the participants' engagement in the discussions. In the interview conducted on December 29, 2010, when they were asked a question: What made you be reluctant to contribute to the discussions?, Lin and Chen, who were low-achieving students, indicated that they had no desire to make any contributions after being teased by Chou and Lo, who were high-achieving students. Lin said, "Chou teased me when I said something wrong. I felt bad...had no mood so I didn't want to talk." Chen responded, "Chou and Lo teased my stammer. I felt embarrassed so I didn't want to talk. They may tease me again [if I continued my talk.]" Their responses suggest that teasing triggered their negative emotions, which reduced their willingness to take part in the discussions. Also, teasing made the

discussion group become an unfriendly context in which the participants were afraid of expressing themselves. This finding supports Goier's (1996) statement that an unsafe discussion context reduced students' engagement level.

Quarrels among the participants often resulted from their peers' criticisms, bossy manners, or disagreements. Of these three reasons, the peers' disagreements sparked most of the quarrels. When interpreting a text, certain participants sometimes had no tolerance for their peers' disagreements. This often occurred among high-achieving participants since there was a rivalry among them. Because of this rivalry, at times, it was not easy for them to negotiate meaning in a peaceful manner. This finding suggests that rivalries among the participants decreased their willingness to negotiate meaning with their peers and to open their minds to accept different ideas. Under such a circumstance, ideas provided by other group members could not allow the participants to self reflect and lead them to a broader view of a particular topic.

Students' learning is not always facilitated through peer collaboration in student-led literature discussion (Kim, 2007). In this study, most of the time, the participants were willing to help their peers understand unknown information. Nevertheless, the participants sometimes instructed their peers impatiently, especially when they were asked to repeat the same explanation or information. Since they lost patience, their repeated instructions were usually less detailed. Consequently, their peers were still confused about unknown information. This finding suggests that the participants' attitudes toward peer collaboration influenced the effectiveness of facilitation. Negative attitudes such as impatience often led to unsuccessful facilitation. The degree of peer's engagement in peer collaboration affects students' learning (Forman & Cazden, 1994).



Table 14 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
		R: Are you done with Wu's question? Lo: He didn't tell us his question. Wu: I am not used to saying something when you are not here.	

**Struggling to understand the text.** During the first month of the study, the participants received explicit instruction about reading comprehension strategies. While reading, they could interpret the text by using these strategies. When the participants requested help for understanding a text, their knowledgeable peers were usually able to provide assistance. Most of the time, the participants' problems could be resolved through peer collaboration. Nevertheless, there were cases in which the participants misinterpreted the text or had difficulty understanding the text. According to the data analysis, their misinterpretation and difficulty often resulted from unfamiliarity with other cultures or a lack of necessary knowledge about a particular subject.

**Unfamiliarity with other cultures.** In this study, four translated books were selected for the discussions, including *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munch, 1996), *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997), *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), and *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000). These stories' settings were in the United States. Since the participants were not familiar with the United States, they encountered some difficulty clarifying unknown information in these texts. For instance, while the participants talked about Stephanie's ponytail coming out of the top of her head in *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Munch, 1996), Chou noticed that in the illustration, Stephanie was eating something and then he asked what Stephanie was eating. In

this illustration, there was a box of cereal on a table. However, the participants could not infer that Stephanie was eating cereal since they did not know cereal was one of the popular breakfast foods in the U.S.

1. Wu: It was weird that Stephanie's ponytail came out of the top of her head. It is like a tree.
2. Ji: That was special, not weird.
3. Lo: That was a special hairstyle.
4. Co: What was Stephanie eating? (pointed at Stephanie and showed the illustration to his peers)
5. Ch: Breakfast.
6. Co: I know she was eating breakfast.
7. R: Do you want to know what kind of food she was eating?
8. Co: Yes. It looked like cookies.
9. Lo: I disagree. No one eats cookies by using a spoon. It looked like fried rice...A bowl of fried rice.
10. Ji: I disagree. Fried rice is for lunch or dinner.
11. Ch: Buns.
12. Li: No one eats buns with a spoon.
13. Ji: Chocolate. They looked like chocolate balls.
14. Li: I disagree. Chocolate is junk food.
15. Co: Maybe she was eating cat food. Look, there was a cat here. (pointed at the cat in the illustration)  
  
(All the participants laughed.)
16. Wu: Do you eat cat food? Nonsense.
17. Lo: We cannot get it. What was that?

18. R: She was eating cereal. Look, a box of cereal was put on the table. Many Americans eat cereal for breakfast. They mix milk and cereal together.
19. Co: They eat cereal for breakfast? I never heard so.
20. Ji: Me neither.

In the above example, Wu opened up the discussion by commenting on Stephanie's hairstyle, but Jian and Lo disagreed with his comment (Turns 1-3). The ponytail topic was cut off when Chou asked for help in understanding what Stephanie was eating (Turn 4). Chou's question motivated some participants to join the discussion by providing their ideas (Turns 8, 9, 11, 13, 15). Each idea was examined based on the participants' assumptions (Turns 9, 10, 12, 14, 16). Chou's idea—Stephanie was eating cat food—amused his peers (Turn 15). Since all the offered ideas were invalidated, Lo declared that they could not figure out what Stephanie was eating (Turn 17). Therefore, I told the participants the answer (Turn 18). If the participants had an idea that cereal was a popular breakfast food in the States, they could easily get the answer since there was a box of cereal on the table. After the participants finished discussing the breakfast topic, they encountered a similar difficulty in their next conversation. That is, they could not figure out why all students in Stephanie's school wore casual clothes rather than uniforms. They had no clue that wearing uniforms is unnecessary for most U.S. students.

1. Ji: Why did all students copy Stephanie's hair style?
2. Wu: Maybe...maybe...they had no talent.
3. R: What kind of talent?
4. Wu: Mmm...I meant...I meant creativity. So weird. I have another question. These students didn't wear uniforms. They wore casual clothes. Why?
5. Lo: Maybe it was on Wednesday.
6. Li: They violated the school regulation.

7. Ch: Maybe...a fair was held in school.
8. R: Is there a relationship between a fair and wearing casual clothes?
9. Ch: We...we are allowed to wear casual clothes when...when...
10. R: When a fair is held in school?  
  
(Chen nodded his head.)
11. Ji: Or an athletic meeting was held in school.
12. Wu: But from the first illustration to...to the end [the last one], They wore casual clothes every day. It was impossible to hold a fair [in school] every day.
13. Co: An athletic meeting could not be held every day.
14. R: In my understanding, most U.S. students are not required to wear uniforms. They are allowed to wear casual clothes in school. So I don't think there was a special reason why they wore casual clothes in school.

In the excerpt above, the discussion was initiated by Jian's question, asking why all the students in Stephanie's school copied Stephanie's hairstyle. This question inspired Wu to join the discussion with his interpretation (Turn 2). Since his response was unclear, I asked him to clarify it (Turn 3). After Wu made a clarification, he suddenly came up with a question unrelated to the hairstyle topic, wondering why the students in Stephanie's school did not wear uniforms (Turn 4). Taiwanese students, from elementary to high schools, are required to wear uniforms in school. Therefore, Wu was confused about why the students in Stephanie's school wore casual clothes in school. In response to Wu's question, some participants offered plausible reasons. Lo, Chen, and Jian's ideas were based on their school experiences (Turns 5, 7, 11). That is, they were allowed to wear casual clothes on every Wednesday or on the day when a special event was held in school. Later, Wu found out that the students wore casual clothes every day. He thus invalidated Chen's idea, arguing that a fair could not be held in school every day (Turn 12). Inspired by Wu's argument, Chou challenged Jian's idea, arguing that it was impossible to hold

an athletic meeting every day (Turn 13). Since the participants could not figure out the answer, I told them the reason (Turn 14). If the participants knew about U.S. school culture—wearing a uniform is not usually required—this problem could be solved without a hitch. The two examples provided above illustrate that the participants had difficulty in understanding the text because they were unfamiliar with the story’s setting. Their confusion was clarified through my explanations.

*A lack of necessary knowledge.* As discussed in Chapter 4, the participants were able to apply their prior knowledge to construct meaning. However, they did not always have the necessary knowledge to interpret a text. Their lack of necessary knowledge sometimes resulted in misinterpretation. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Snail Started it* (Reider, 1997). While the participants talked about Pig’s dancing, Lo asked what Pig was wearing on her feet. In this discussion, the participants brought some misinterpretations to the group.

1. Ch: Pig was dancing. (pointed at the illustration)
2. Ji: Unbelievable.
3. R: Why do you think so?
4. Ji: Pig was too fat to dance.
5. R: Pig probably wanted to lose weight by dancing.
6. Lo: What was Pig wearing on his feet? (pointed at Pig in the illustration.)
7. Co: Ballet shoes. She was dancing.
8. Li: They looked like high heels.
9. Ch: Maybe boots.
10. Ji: Maybe sandals.

(I flipped the book and took a look at the illustration that the participants were discussing.)

11. R: Why do you think Pig was wearing high heels? In addition to shoes, do you have any other ideas?
12. Lo: They looked like high heels. (pointed at a Pig's hoof in the illustration) Shoes are for feet, aren't they?
13. Wu: Yes, shoes are for feet. Except shoes, what else Pig could wear on her feet?
14. R: Look carefully. Those were not shoes. They were Pig's hooves. Hooves are stiff things connecting to the end of a pig's legs.
15. Co: Are these hooves? I have no idea. (pointed at a Pig's hoof in the illustration)
16. R: Yes, pigs have hooves.
17. Lo: I never saw real pigs so I don't know pigs have hooves.
18. Li: I have no idea that pigs have hooves, either.

In the beginning of the discussion, Chen shared his interpretation of an illustration—Pig was dancing. Chen's sharing motivated Jian to comment on Pig's dancing (Turns 2, 4). The topic switched when Lo came up with a question, wondering what Pig was wearing on her feet (Turn 6). In response to Lo's question, four participants offered their ideas related to shoes (Turns 7-10). I took a look at the illustration that the participants were discussing and found that they regarded Pig's hooves as shoes. Then I asked a thought-provoking question: Why do you think Pig was wearing high heels (Turn 11)? Responding to my question, Lo and Wu told me their reasons and insisted that Pig was wearing shoes. Hooves did not come into their minds (Turns 12, 13). Therefore, I corrected their misinterpretations and explained to them what hooves were (Turn 14). Chou, Lo, and Lin's responses to my explanation suggested that they lacked necessary knowledge—pigs have hooves—so they misinterpreted the illustration (Turns 15, 17, 18).

In addition to misinterpreting the text, the participants' lack of necessary knowledge contributed to their difficulty understanding the text. In the novel, *A Vietnamese Kid* (Kang, 2009), there was a chapter describing Vietnamese iced coffee. The author mentioned that some

Frenchmen came to Vietnam and lived there during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and they introduced coffee to the Vietnamese. When the group discussed this section, Jian sought help to understand why the French lived in Vietnam during that time period. However, no participant could solve her problem because they had little knowledge about Vietnamese history.

1. Ji: Why did some Frenchmen live in Vietnam during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century?
2. Lo: Visited Vietnam.
3. Co: They probably were tourists.
4. Ji: But the story said some Frenchmen *lived* in Vietnam. They seemed to stay there for a long while. (emphasized the word “lived”) Tourists...tourists don’t stay in a place for a long while.
5. Wu: Why did the French want to live in Vietnam? It is an undeveloped country.
6. Lo: France is far from Vietnam. Why did the French go there?  
  
(No idea was offered. All the participants sat in silence for a few seconds.)
7. R: Chen, did you get any idea?
8. Ch: For adventuring. I guess.
9. Co: I have no idea.
10. R: Anyone wants to make a guess?  
  
(The whole group was silent for a few seconds.)
11. R: Because the French colonized Vietnam during that period of time. I meant the French ruled Vietnam. Like that Japanese governed Taiwan before.
12. Lo: *Soga*. (in Japanese) I don’t know this.

In the above example, Jian encountered unknown information in the text and requested help to understand it (Turn 1). In response to Jian’s problem, Lo first offered her idea, speculating that the French visited Vietnam (Turn 2) and her idea was supported by Chou (Turn 3). However, Jian invalidated Lo’s idea based on the textual information, arguing that the French

stayed in Vietnam for a long while so they were not tourists (Turn 4). Instead of answering Jian's question, Wu and Chou came up with two questions, which were similar to Jian's (Turns 5, 6). Nevertheless, no participant responded to their questions. To let the discussion continue, I invited Chen to offer his idea (Turn 7). Chen then made a guess, but his idea was not examined (Turn 8). Later, Chou declared that he could not figure out the answer (Turn 9). Since no idea was provided after I asked for more guesses, I told the group about French's colonization of Vietnam during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Turns 10, 11). Jian's doubt was solved through my explanation.

**Struggling with a student-centered literature discussion format.** Since the participants had been accustomed to a teacher-directed style of discussion, the transition to a discussion format that requested them to take more responsibility was not easy. In some cases, they sat in silence and had no idea how to begin. At times, they waited for my leadership when a question was raised. Their struggles with a new discussion format were evident during the first few discussion sessions. The following excerpt was taken from a discussion in *One Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), in which the participants talked about the relationship between Maddie and Wanda. After Lo asked whether Maddie and Wanda were lesbians, Chou raised another question immediately. The participants then discussed two questions at the same time. The participants' responses to these two questions were mixed into one discussion. Consequently, Lo and Wu were confused about their peers' responses.

1. Lo: Why did Maddie keep thinking of Wanda? Are they lesbians?
2. Co: I have another question. I wonder whether Maddie was Wanda's good friend before?
3. Ji: I think they were good friends before because...Maddie felt sorry after she teased Wanda.

4. Wu: They were not lesbians...Maddie just...just wanted to know when...when Wanda would come back.
5. Li: Maddie was Wanda's good friend before because they were lesbians.
6. Lo: Did you respond to my question or Chou's?
7. Li: Mmmm...What is your question?
8. Ch: Maddie missed Wanda.
9. Wu: I am confused. Which question did you respond to?
10. R: I am confused as well. Discuss one question at a time. You seem to forget this discussion strategy. Which question do you want to discuss first?

In the example above, Chou raised another question immediately after Lo asked if Maddie and Wanda were lesbians (Turns 1, 2). Then these two questions were discussed at the same time. In her talk, Jian articulated why she considered Maddie and Wanda good friends. It was apparent that she responded to Chou's question (Turn 3). In his response, Wu told the group why he believed that Maddie and Wanda were not lesbians. He apparently responded to Lo's lesbian question (Turn 4). However, in her talk, Lin mentioned both "good friends" and "lesbians" (Turn 5), which caused Lo's confusion about which question Lin responded to (Turn 6). Later, Chen offered his idea, but in his talk, there was no clue that allowed his peers to know which question he responded to (Turn 8). As a result, his idea confused Wu (Turn 9). To help the participants maintain the discussion, I suggested to them to discuss one topic at a time (Turn 10). The above example demonstrates that the participants did not know how to manage the topic well. They were not supposed to discuss two questions simultaneously.

During the first few discussions, the participants tended to rely on my leadership. They stopped discussing when I left the group. For instance, in a discussion of *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997), when Wu was asking a question, I left my seat for a few minutes.

When returning, I found the participants chatting. I asked them what Wu's question was. Lo told me that Wu did not tell them his question. Wu then said, "I am not used to saying something when you are not here. We may not know how to discuss my question." His response suggested that without my presence, he had no confidence in running the discussion. He relied on my leadership. According to the videotape, Wu told the group, "Wait a moment. I will tell you my question when Ms. Chang returns" right after I left my seat. This example suggests that although the participants received preparatory instruction and training, they still lacked confidence in running the discussions on their own.

Since Mr. Chen's classroom was more teacher-centered, his students looked at him when they spoke in class. Consequently, the participants usually looked at me, but not at their peers when sharing something in the group. They were accustomed to talking to an authority figure. For example, while the participants talked about the man's purpose for using a wooden stick in *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2007), Chen looked at me when he started to talk. Even though I urged him to look at his peers twice, he ended up looking at me.

1. Wu: Why did this man hold a wooden stick? He probably wanted to use this stick to hit the man sitting at the top of the building.  
  
(...)
18. R: We should finish the stick issue first.
19. Ch: I also think that the stick...(I was sitting behind Chen. He turned his head to me.)
20. R: Look at them. I am listening to your talk. (I interrupted Chen's talk.)  
  
(Chen turned his head to his peers.)
21. Ch: The stick can be used for making...making a ladder. The residents...(Chen turned to see me again.)
22. R: Look at them.

23. Ch: The residents needed a ladder for building their houses. (He turned to see me when finishing the talk.)

In this discussion session, I sat behind Chen. Chen turned to see me when he started to express his idea (Turn 19). I interrupted him, requesting him to look at his peers (Turn 20). Then he turned his head back to his peers and continued his talk. Nevertheless, after a few seconds, he turned his head to me again (Turn 21). Thus, I interrupted him again, urging him to look at his peers (Turn 22). Chen ended up looking at me when he finished his talk (Turn 23). This example demonstrates that even though the control of the discussions was handed over to the participants, they were still used to talking to an authority figure. Through my repeated reminder about eye contact, the participants gradually got used to looking at their peers when sharing.

The participants realized that they had freedom to say anything relevant to the topic under discussion. Nevertheless, there were cases in which they did not take the discussions seriously and have meaningful conversations. At times, they responded to one another playfully, which often caused the problem under discussion to be unresolved. This often occurred when the first respondent offered a playful response, which evoked other group members to provide similar playful responses. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *One Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), in which I initiated a question, wondering why everything about Svenson was yellow. Chou first responded to my question playfully and then other playful responses were provided by his peers.

1. R: Why was everything about Svenson yellow?
2. Co: Because Svenson was possessed by a yellow ghost.
3. Wu: Maybe...Maybe Svenson was possessed by a mango or a pumpkin. (giggled)
4. Lo: He probably was possessed by a pineapple. (giggled)

(The participants laughed loudly when each idea was expressed.)

5. R: Okay, any other idea?

(No more response, but the participants kept laughing.)

6. R: Seriously, why was everything about Svenson yellow?

In the above example, the discussion was initiated by my question, asking why everything about Svenson was yellow. To my question, Chou first gave me feedback by providing a playful response (Turn 2), which made his peers laugh. Inspired by Chou's response, Wu and Lo offered other ideas related to possession (Turns 3, 4), which made their peers laugh again. Considering that discussion should produce meaningful conversation, I had the participants think about the question seriously after their playful talk (Turn 5). The participants' ideas, in this conversation, were baseless. They intended to amuse their peers, but not to resolve the problem. When such a problem occurred, instead of interrupting their playful talk immediately, I restated the question and had them take it seriously after their playful talk ceased. I did so because I wanted to limit the extent to which I directed the discussion.

### **Summary**

When the participants encountered unknown information in the text, they requested help for clarifying points about which they were confused. Usually, their problems could be solved through peer collaboration. However, the participants sometimes had difficulty in clarifying their peers' confusion or misinterpreted the text because they lacked necessary knowledge. At times, they struggled to understand the text since they were unfamiliar with the stories' settings. This type of difficulty often occurred when they discussed the selected translated books because these stories' settings were outside Taiwan. When they had a difficult time figuring out the answer, I offered my assistance by providing necessary information and knowledge. This finding suggests that during the discussions, the teacher's presence was necessary because the students sometimes

needed the teacher's help for understanding other cultures or the text. To solve students' problems related to other cultures, the teacher needs to understand multiple cultures and has ability to clarify misinformation and present authentic culture (Au & Raphael, 2000). This finding corresponds to Moller's (2002) study in which she offered historical backgrounds for students when they discussed historical injustices that were unfamiliar to them.

Maloch (2000) stated that challenges that result from shifting roles of responsibility in literature discussions are not avoidable. In this study, since the participants had few prior experiences of working in a small group and had been used to teacher-directed classroom activities, problems occurred due to shifting roles of responsibility. Some conflicts were evident during the first few discussion sessions such as discussing two questions simultaneously and relying on my leadership. These problems reduced the effectiveness of the literature discussions. When such problems emerged, I reminded them of the discussion rules and strategies and provided necessary help. These findings suggest that the transition from a teacher-centered learning context to a more student-centered one is not easy. Even though the participants received preparatory instruction, they still needed my continual guidance and support when the responsibilities for the discussions were handed over to them. As LaRose (2007) stated, even when literature discussions are operated by students themselves, the teacher should not release all responsibilities for their conduct. It takes time for students to become accustomed to learning a new context in which they have more responsibility for their learning and can internalize new ways of interacting with their peer

## Chapter 7

### How Does the Researcher Facilitate the Participants' Discussions?

Jewell and Pratt (1999) claimed that a teacher's participation in student-led literature discussion is crucial to ensuring that students know how to operate their discussions. Also, Eeds and Peterson (1997) stated, "There is no substitute for the teacher's presence and participation" (p. 57). The participants, in this study, had no experience of operating student-led literature discussions so I provided them with preparatory instruction during the first month of the study. Even though the participants were responsible for the discussions during the last fourteen weeks, instead of releasing all the responsibilities to them, I provided continual support. In this chapter, I present findings for the fourth research question: How does the researcher facilitate the participants' discussions? In the first section, I focus on work I completed during the preparatory stage, including (a) offering preparatory instruction, (b) creating a risk-free environment, and (c) selecting an appropriate discussion time. In the second section, I present findings about my continual support for the participants when they ran the discussions by themselves.

#### Offering Preparatory Instruction

In the preparatory instruction phase, the participants were introduced to (a) the concept of student-led literature discussions, (b) discussion rules, (c) discussion strategies, (d) reading comprehension strategies, and (e) the use of sticky notes. Two books—*Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007) and *The Water from the Mountain* (Ye, 2008)—were selected for the participants to read and practice discussion and reading comprehension strategies. The main reason I chose these two books was that they were easy to read.

**The concept of student-led literature discussions.** During the first discussion meeting, I had the participants share their thoughts about student-led literature discussions. Lin said, "We

will discuss stories.” Chen said, “Share my ideas.” Lo responded, “Read stories and then you will ask us questions.” Jian responded, “That [literature discussion] is about discussing stories.” Chou replied, “Read stories and then [we] come here to discuss them.” Wu answered, “Read stories and...and then you will give us questions.” Based on their responses, the participants realized that student-led literature discussion was about reading and discussing stories and sharing ideas. However, they lacked the concepts of peer collaboration and autonomy because no participant mentioned that s/he would help one another and manage discussions by themselves. After they shared their thoughts, I told them, “In student-led literature discussions, you should raise questions related to texts; discuss questions, share thoughts, ideas, and feelings; and help one another solve problems. You are in charge of operating discussions.”

**Discussion rules.** During the first discussion meeting, instead of listing all the discussion rules for the participants, I had them think about what discussion rules could help them operate successful discussions and why these rules were important. To help them answer this question, I had them recall how they worked together in a small group in science class. Chou first gave me feedback, saying, “Paying attention to others’ talk. We may misunderstand others if we don’t pay attention [to their talk].” Wu said, “Don’t interrupt. Interrupting is rude.” Lo responded, “We helped one another.” Jian replied, “We shared our thoughts.” In addition to these four rules, I added five more rules and explained why they were crucial, including reading the book and writing down responses on sticky notes before the discussion, speaking clearly, respecting others, taking turns, and asking for help. A total of nine discussion rules were listed on the board in front of the classroom. By doing so, the participants could have a clear idea about what rules they should follow during the discussions.

**Discussion strategies.** During the second and third meetings, I told the participants my expectations of student-led literature discussion; we then worked together to generate strategies for meeting these expectations. My expectations and the discussion strategies were listed on paper and each participant received a copy (Table 15). My goal was for the participants to have a clear idea about what they were expected to do and what discussion strategies they could utilize.

Chiloat (2003) stated that direct explanation is an effective teaching method. Therefore, I taught the participants each strategy, explaining when and how it could be used directly. The participants were offered opportunities to practice each strategy during the following discussion meetings. Each strategy was taught on the basis of the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). That is, I first explained and modeled a particular strategy and then the participants learned to use the strategy collaboratively with my support. As the participants became more familiar with this particular strategy, I gradually released my share of the responsibility to them.

Table 15

*Researcher's Expectations of Literature Discussion and Associated Strategies*

Researcher's expectations	Explanations	How to reach the expectations
All the participants get involved in the discussions.	All the participants should make contributions to the discussions. Every participant shares responsibilities.	Ask questions. Share thoughts/ideas. Join the discussion by responding to peers' talk, asking follow-up questions (e.g., why do you think so?), and expressing agreement/disagreement with peers' ideas with reasons.
Generate topics and focus on one topic at a time.	Discussion is not chat. Discussion is supposed to produce productive talk. To avoid confusion, the discussion should center on one topic at a time.	Initiate topics related to content or an illustration. Generate topics related to an on-going discussion.

(continued)

Table 15 (continued)

Researcher's expectations	Explanations	How to reach the expectations
		Change the topic when the previous one is finished. Alert a peer when s/he raises unrelated topics.
Support one another during the discussions.	Student-led literature discussion encourages students to learn from one another. Peer collaboration is required and appreciated.	Solve peers' problems. Support peers' arguments with reasons. Help peers understand unknown information in the text.
The discussion group is a risk-free context.	When a discussion takes place in a safe context, students are more willing to take risks and respond.	No teasing. No insults. Appreciate peers' contributions. Respect different ideas. Disagree politely.

The following are examples of how I modeled a discussion strategy—asking questions—and how the participants carried out this strategy. In the beginning, I told the participants that they could ask questions to clarify confusion and generate open-ended questions from content as well as illustrations. Then I modeled this strategy by asking the participants an open-ended question: Why was Wei's lunchbox gone?, which came from a story event about Wei's missing lunchbox in *Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007). When they practiced this strategy, some participants were able to ask open-ended questions. For instance, Chen asked, "Who might steal Wei's lunchbox?" and Jian asked, "Wei had no lunch. How could he solve this problem?" During the next discussion meeting, some participants were able to apply this strategy when they discussed a story event about the classmates' suspicion that Monkey stole Wei's lunchbox. For example, Chou asked a question generated from the content, wondering why Wei's classroom suspected that Monkey stole Wei's lunchbox? Lin asked, "How could Monkey steal Wei's lunchbox without being noticed?"

It is important to note that these discussion strategies were new to the participants so it took time for them to understand and internalize these strategies. For instance, some participants did not know how to ask open-ended questions in the beginning. They asked more known-answer questions. They seemed to test whether their peers read the story carefully. While the participants discussed where and how to find Wei's missing lunchbox on *Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007), for example, Wu and Lo asked two close-ended questions. Wu asked, "Where did Wei put his lunchbox when he got the lunchbox from her mother?" Lo asked, "What food did Wei's mother make for Wei?" In the beginning of the story, the author described what food Wei's mother made for Wei and mentioned Wei put his lunchbox in his backpack. The answers to Wu and Lo's questions could easily be found in the text. Through my repeated modeling and elaborated explanation, known-answer questions were seldom raised by the end of the first month.

Since the participants were accustomed to seeking one accurate answer in a traditional classroom, when they practiced a discussion strategy—sharing thoughts/ideas, some participants frequently asked me if their ideas were correct. In this manner, they aimed to affirm that their ideas satisfied me. This conflict was evident during the first two weeks of the discussions. Therefore, I addressed many times that there was no one accurate answer in a text and any idea related to a text was welcome. While the participants talked about Monkey's suspicious conduct on *Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007), for example, Chen asked an open-ended question, wondering why Monkey stole Wei's lunchbox. In response to Chen's question, Wu expressed his interpretation. After he finished his talk, he turned to ask me if his interpretation was correct.

1. Ch: Why did Monkey steal Wei's lunchbox?
2. R: Any idea?

3. Lo: He was hungry. Very, very hungry.
4. R: Great, you offer a plausible reason.
5. Wu: Maybe...maybe...he was too lazy to find food. (turned to look at me)  
Can I say so?
6. R: Again, no one accurate answer. Tell us any ideas you have.

In the excerpt above, the topic was initiated by Chen's question about Monkey's motivation for stealing Wei's lunchbox. This question inspired Lo to jump into the discussion by expressing her interpretation (Turn 2). Later, Wu shared his interpretation with the group. Right after he finished his talk, he turned to ask me if his idea was acceptable (Turn 5). Instead of judging his interpretation, I emphasized there was no one accurate answer (Turn 6). Through my continuous addressing of the concept—no one accurate answer—the participants gradually did not ask me whether their ideas were accurate.

Considering that the participants needed self confidence in the learning processes, I praised them when they successfully employed these strategies. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *The Water from the Mountain* (Ye, 2008), in which the participants discussed what caused river pollution. Chou offered a possible reason: there were many restaurants along the river. Then Lo attempted to get more information from Chou by asking, "How can this cause pollution?" I praised Lo since she adopted a discussion strategy—asking follow-up questions—successfully.

1. Ji: The Hsintein River is polluted. The water was clean before.
2. Wu: Because some people throw trash [into the Hsintein River].
3. R: What else?
4. Co: There are many restaurants along the Hsintein River.
5. Lo: How can this cause pollution?

6. Co: Because...because they dump kitchen waste [into the Hsintein River].
7. R: Really, I never heard so. Lo, you just asked a follow-up question. You did a good job.
8. Lo: Ya! I know how to use it. (showed a hand gesture “V”)

In the beginning of the conversation, Jian shared information about the Hsintein River, which opened up the discussion. Then Wu and Chou told the group why the Hsintein River was polluted (Turns 2, 4). To understand why restaurants could cause river pollution, Lo asked Chou a follow-up question (Turn 5). To Lo’s request for further information, Chou told the group that kitchen waste was dumped into the Hsintein River (Turn 6). Later, I praised Lo for using this strategy—asking follow-up questions—successfully (Turn 7). Based on Lo’s hand gesture “V” and her response, she was pretty happy that she knew how to apply this strategy (Turn 8).

**Reading comprehension strategies.** During the fourth and fifth meetings, reading comprehension strategies were introduced to the participants. In the same way that I modeled the discussion strategies, each reading comprehension strategy was taught on the basis of the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The following are types and explanations of reading comprehension strategies (Table 16).

Table 16

*Reading Comprehension Strategies Types and Explanations*

Types	Explanations
Making connections	This strategy allows students to learn new things from they have known. Connections include text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-prior knowledge.
Questioning	Students ask questions to enhance understanding, solve problems, identify specific details, clarify confusion, and discover new ideas.

(continued)

Table 16 (continued)

Types	Explanations
Inferring	Students speculate about what is to come based on what they have known or clues that come from the text.
Synthesizing	Students review and sort information to gain new insights.

From *Strategies that work: Teaching comprehension to enhance understanding*, by Stephanie Harvey & Anne Goudvis.

The following is an example of how I modeled a comprehension strategy—making a text-to-self connection—and how the participants practiced the strategy. Before I modeled the strategy, I told the participants that they could share whatever the story reminded them of their personal lives. Then, when the participants read a section describing the mountain scenery in *The Water from the Mountain* (Ye, 2008), I modeled this strategy by sharing my experience of camping in the Ali Mountains and describing the area’s scenery. Later, some participants applied this strategy by sharing their previous travel experiences in the mountains. Jian said, “My family camped in the Ali Mountain before. There were a lot of giant trees.” Lo said, “I visited the Jude Mountain last winter. I saw snow. I was lucky.” Chen said, “My father and I sometimes go hiking in the small mountain near my community.”

Similar to learning the discussion strategies, it took time for the participants to understand and be able to apply the reading comprehension strategies. Through practicing each strategy and my reinforcement, the participants gradually understood when and how to use particular strategies. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Who Stole My Lunch* (Ye, 2007), in which the participants talked about how Monkey stole Wei’s lunchbox. When Lo offered an idea by using a strategy—inferring, I reinforced this strategy.

1. Wu: If Monkey really stole Wei’s lunchbox, how did he come into Wei’s classroom?
2. Ji: Maybe Monkey stole Wei’s lunchbox on his way to school.

3. Wu: I disagree. [If so,] Wei...Wei could be aware...Mmm (a seven-second pause)
4. R: Aware what? Monkey was taking his lunchbox from his backpack?
5. Wu: Yes. He would not let Monkey take his lunchbox away.
6. Lo: In this illustration, Wei's seat was closed to the window. I think [Monkey came to the classroom] from the window.
7. R: I agree. This is an easy way for Monkey to get Wei's lunchbox. Great, Lo provided us with her idea based on the illustration. She used the strategy of inferring.

In the example above, Wu's question about Monkey's way of coming into Wei's classroom initiated the discussion. This question inspired Jian to join the discussion by expressing her idea (Turn 2). However, Wu disagreed with Jian's idea. When trying to explain why he was opposed to Jian's idea, he had difficulty finishing his explanation (Turn 3). Thus, I offered my support (Turn 4). With my help, Wu completed his talk (Turn 5). Lo, based on the illustration, also shared her idea with the group (Turn 6). Later, I reinforced the reading comprehension strategy that Lo used—inferring (Turn 7).

**Use of sticky notes.** According to Daniels (2002), sticky notes assist students in recalling what they would like to share with their group members. The participants were offered sticky notes and instructed to mark selected pages and jot down their thoughts, questions, and comments, or make illustrations representing impressive story events. Sticky notes allowed the participants to identify passages that they would like to share as well as reminded them of what they wanted to discuss.

### **Creating a Relatively Risk-Free Environment**

Miller (2003) stated that a risk-free environment allows students to feel free to express their thoughts during discussions. Therefore, during the preparatory phase, I aimed to create a relatively risk-free environment in which the participants could feel comfortable to express

themselves. In the beginning, I encouraged the participants to respond to the text by taking a turn. This approach allowed each participant to have an opportunity to talk while other group members considered their peers' opinions and ideas and then responded to their peers. In this process, I stressed several times that it was not necessary to agree with one's idea, but it was necessary to respect different perspectives. Over time, the participants could talk freely and respond to their peers spontaneously.

### **Selecting an Appropriate Discussion Time**

In my original plan, the participants and I were supposed to meet at 8 am every Tuesday and Thursday. However, some participants were usually late to school and could not finish classroom routines before 8 am. As a result, it was difficult for us to start the discussions on time. We usually started the discussions at 8:15 am. However, the discussions had to be ended before 8:35 am since the first class began at 8:40 am. In this short period of time, the participants could not discuss the text deeply and have much meaningful talk. The discussions were therefore finished in a rush. Additionally, some participants were sluggish because they did not eat breakfast. Lin even told me that she had no desire to do something in the early morning. These factors decreased the effectiveness of the discussions. Based on my previous teaching experiences in an elementary school, I realized that having students do a task when they just arrived at school was not easy. They needed some time to get ready for a school day. To increase the quality of the discussions, I changed the discussion time after receiving Mr. Chen's permission to do so. Students in Mr. Chen's class had a seventy-minute lunch break, from 12-1:10 pm. They usually finished their lunch within thirty minutes so Mr. Chen allowed me to pull the participants out of the classroom after 12:30 pm. The participants and I met at 12:35 pm every Tuesday and Thursday, starting from September 23, 2010. They were glad that I switched

the discussion time because they felt that they had a privilege for leaving the classroom while their classmates were asked to take a nap after lunch in the classroom. They told me that taking a nap was torture. Most of the time, they were in a good mood to come to my classroom and discuss the texts. After the discussion time was changed, the participants had sufficient time discussing the text. Also, their good moods increased their engagement in the discussion.

### **The Researcher's Continual Support**

Even though the participants received explicit instruction during the preparatory stage, I did not hand over all responsibilities to them when they were in charge of the discussions. I sat in the group and offered essential help. As Maloch (2000) claimed, to maximize the possibility that students can manage well student-led literature discussions, the teacher needs to be present in the group to help facilitate students' interactions. It is important for the teacher to monitor the effectiveness of literature discussions for each student. In this section, I discuss my continual support for the participants when they operated their own discussions during the last fourteen weeks of the study. Through coding the transcriptions, two themes were identified: (a) monitoring the participants' behavior and (b) facilitating the discussions.

**Monitoring the participants' behavior.** Even though the discussion rules were introduced and written on the board in front of the classroom, the participants sometimes broke the rules, which often led to frustration and tension within the group. To make the discussions more successful, I monitored the participants' behavior and reminded them of the discussion rules. I intervened in the discussions when the participants (a) disturbed other group members, (b) were distracted, (c) used foul language, (d) interrupted other group members' talk, and (e) cut off the topic. Table 17 presents types, descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of the participants' problematic behaviors.

Table 17

*Participants' Problematic Behavior*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Disturbing other group members	The participant's behavior interfered with other group members' participation.	Wu: The story says that Peggy is the most... (Chou was shaking the table.) Wu: Hou! R: Chou, stop that, please.	10
Being distracted	The participant did not concentrate on the discussion. His/her attention was drawn away by other things.	Chen: Some of my classmates insulted not only me but also my mother. (...) (Jian looked at the clock several times) R: Jian, are you listening to their talk?	12
Using foul language	The participant used profanities.	Chou: Peggy was shameless, like a " <i>chù shēng</i> " (the meaning is similar to a beast.) (...) R: What do you think of using the word " <i>chù shēng</i> "? Lo: Not a good word. My mother told me not to use this word.	8
Interrupting other group members' talk	The participant took the floor away from a peer who was sharing something in the group.	Chen: Wu asked me to leave him alone this morning. I had no idea... (interrupted by Wu) Wu: You blocked... R: Wu, would you please let Chen finish his talk first?	21

(continued)

Table 17 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Cutting off the topic	When the topic under discussion had not been finished, the participant raised an irrelevant topic abruptly.	Wu: Based on this illustration, I think Wanda lived in a poor community. Lo: I agree. A poor, dirty community. Trash was everywhere. Jian: Also, I think (interrupted by Lo) Lo: Why did Wanda's classmates not notice that Wanda was absent for several days? R: Lo, we have not done with the poor community topic. Tell us your question later, please.	13

***Disturbing other group members.*** The participants' disturbing behaviors such as knocking on the table, making loud noises, or pulling peer's hair often hindered the discussions and irritated their peers. For instance, when the participants talked about Pig's walking in *Snail Started it* (Reider, 1997), Jian attempted to share information about the sacrificial pig that could not walk. However, Lin, sitting next to Jian, took Jian's pencil box and eraser away, which caused Jian's talk to be interrupted. I stopped Lin's disturbing behavior when Jian got mad.

1. Co: How could Pig walk? She was fat. Walking might be very difficult for him.
2. Wu: She certainly could walk. But [she walked] slowly.
3. Ji: The fattest pig is the sacrificial pig. It cannot walk. I... (Lin took Jian's pencil box away.) Hey! Don't take my stuff.  
  
(Lin returned Jian's pencil box.)

4. Ji: I know...many temples hold events to thank gods. In the event...(Lin took Jian's eraser.) Hey!
5. R: Lin, are you listening to Jian's talk? Pay attention, please. Return the eraser.
6. Ji: You are so annoying. I want to say...in the event, people kill sacrificial pigs. I saw some sacrificial pig before. They were too fat to stand up and walk.

In the above example, Chou opened up the discussion by asking whether Pig could walk. Chou's question motivated Wu to join the discussion with his thought, indicating that Pig could walk slowly (Turn 2). Later, Jian jumped into the discussion by sharing information about the sacrificial pig (Turn 3). When she was sharing, Lin, sitting next to Jian, took Jian's pencil box away. To ask Lin to return her pencil box, Jian stopped her talk (Turn 3). After getting her pencil box back, Jian continued her talk (Turn 4). However, after a few seconds, Lin took Jian's eraser away, which caused Jian's stopping her talk again. I thus asked Lin to return the eraser and pay attention to the discussion (Turn 5). In her last talk, Jian complained about Lin's annoying behavior (Turn 6). Lin's disturbing behavior, in this example, not only interrupted the discussion but also annoyed Jian. Through my intervention, Jian finished her turn and Lin did not bother Jian anymore.

***Being distracted.*** For some participants, it was difficult for them to concentrate on the discussions. They were easily distracted by things around them. When the participants were inattentive, they usually contributed nothing to the discussions. In the following example, while the participants discussed why all Wanda's classmates wanted Wanda to hurry up and finish her oral reading in *One Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), Lo was distracted by a student standing outside the classroom. She looked at that student for a while and paid no attention to the discussion. Considering that all the participants should be involved in the discussion, I thus drew Lo's attention back.

1. R: When Wanda did oral reading, why did her classmates want her to hurry up and finish?
2. Ji: She could not read at all. She wasted everybody's time.
3. Co: She read slowly.  
  
(Lo was looking outside. She was distracted by a student standing outside the classroom.)
4. Wu: Yes, she read slowly so...so her classmates lost patience.
5. R: Why did she read slowly?
6. Co: She had little knowledge.
7. R: Little knowledge? But she just read aloud the book. Is there a relationship between reading slowly and little knowledge? Lo, are you listening to us?  
  
(Lo turned her head back.)
8. Ji: I think Chou meant Wanda knew few English vocabulary words.
9. Co: Yes, I meant she knew few English vocabulary words since she immigrated to the U.S. from Poland.
10. Lo: What are you discussing?
11. Wu: The same question.
12. Lo: What is the question?
13. R: You miss our talk.

In the excerpt above, the discussion was initiated by my question about Wanda's classmates' attitude toward Wanda's oral reading. In response to my question, Jian and Chou came up with two plausible reasons (Turns 2, 3). When Chou was expressing his idea, I noticed that Lo was looking at a student standing outside the classroom. I assumed she would return to the discussion soon so I did not have any reaction to her distraction. Later, Wu jumped into the discussion by supporting Chou's idea, indicating that Wanda's slow reading resulted in her

classmates' impatience (Turn 4). To Chou and Wu's ideas, I asked a follow-up question, wondering what caused Wanda's slow reading (Turn 5). To my prompting question, Chou told the group his reason (Turn 6). Since Chou's argument confused me, I requested him to clarify it. Also, I noticed that Lo was still looking at that student so I drew her attention back to the discussion (Turn 7). After Chou clarified his argument (Turn 9), Lo wanted to join the discussion, but she had no idea what her peers were discussing (Turns 10, 12). In this example, Lo's attention was distracted so she not only missed her peers' talk but also contributed nothing to the discussion. Although her behavior did not disturb other group members or hinder the discussion, to make every participant get involved in the discussions, it was necessary for me to draw her attention back to the discussion.

**Using foul language.** Sometimes the participants paid little attention to their language use, especially when they argued aggressively. There were cases in which they used profanities. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), in which the participants discussed whether marrying a Taiwanese man was better than marrying a Vietnamese man. Wu told the group that New Taiwanese Immigrant children were “*zá zhōng*” (means hybrids), which was an insulting word. Inspired by Wu's use of an insulting word, Chou came up with another one—retarded. At the end of the discussion, I had the participants think about whether using “*zá zhōng*” was appropriate.

1. Li: Is marrying a Taiwanese man better than marrying a Vietnamese man?
2. Ji: I don't think so. Those Vietnamese women [who marry Taiwanese men] need to learn Chinese. Before they understand Chinese, they cannot say... (a five-second pause)
3. R: They cannot communicate with Taiwanese. Is this what you want to say?
4. Ji: Yes.

5. Wu: We have different cultures. Vietnamese women [who marry Taiwanese men] have to adjust themselves to a new culture.
6. R: Chen, did your mother tell you that she had culture shock. I mean she encountered challenges due to cultural differences.
7. Ch: (Thought for a while) My mother likes cold dishes, but we [Taiwanese] like hot dishes. She misses Vietnamese food.
8. R: A different eating habit.
9. Wu: If they marry Taiwanese men, their children [New Taiwanese Immigrant children] are called “*zá zhōng*”. (giggled)
10. Co: “*zá zhōng*”. Retarded. (giggled)  
  
(...)
18. R: What do you think about using the word “*zá zhōng*”? Wu just used this word to describe New Taiwanese Immigrant children.
19. Lo: [It] insults New Taiwanese Immigrant children.
20. Ji: Yes, [it] insults Chen. It is a bad word.
21. R: It involves a negative connotation. So using which word would be better?
22. Wu: Maybe hybrids. But I heard people calling New Taiwanese Immigrant children “*zá zhōng*” in a TV show.
23. R: I think the word “hybrids” is more appropriate. Some people call New Taiwanese Immigrant children “*zá zhōng*”, but I don’t think that is an appropriate word.

The conversation above centered on Vietnamese women who married Taiwanese men.

Jian and Wu expressed their opinions about foreign brides (Turns 2, 5). Motivated by Wu’s opinion about different cultures, I asked Chen, whose mother was Vietnamese, whether his mother encountered culture shock in Taiwan (Turn 6). Then Chen shared his mother’s experience (Turn 7). Later, Wu brought up a statement unrelated to the topic under discussion. That is, he described New Taiwanese Immigrant children with an insulting word—*zá zhōng* (Turn 9). Inspired by Wu’s use of an insulting word, Chou came up with another one—retarded

(Turn 10). Based on Chou's response, I could not tell if he intended to use this word to describe New Taiwanese Immigrant children. After the topic was completed, instead of judging Wu's use of an insulting word directly, I had the participants think about whether using the word "zá zhōng" was proper (Turn 18). Jian and Lo then told the group their thoughts of the word, indicating that it was inappropriate to call New Taiwanese Immigrant children "zá zhōng" (Turns 19, 20). Wu ended up coming up with an appropriate word "hybrids" (Turn 22). This example demonstrates how I corrected a participant's use of foul language.

It is important to note that certain participants did not deem that they used foul language because those profanities they brought to the discussions were also used by their family members. No one told them not to use those profanities. For example, when the participants discussed whether the word "līng bā" (means a father) was a profanity, Lin said, "I don't think it is a profanity because my father used this word frequently." Also, the participants learned profanities from some TV shows and they could not judge whether using those words was appropriate. Because of different cultural backgrounds, the participants and I had different standards for language use. To avoid being judgmental, most of the time, I had all participants think and discuss whether their peers' language use was proper. I tried not to judge their language use directly.

***Interrupting other group members' talk.*** When they were eager to express their ideas, the participants frequently interrupted their peers' talk. At times, some participants could be aware that they interrupted their peers' talk. They were willing to apologize to their peers and let them finish their talk first. Nevertheless, on some occasions, my intervention was needed when interruptions occurred. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion of *Memories* (Chen, 2000), a wordless picture book. While Lin was responding to the question: What was the girl

going to do in PingDong?, Wu interrupted her twice, which irritated Lin. Since Wu was not aware that he interrupted Lin, I asked Wu to let Lin finish her talk first.

1. Ch: Where was this girl going?
2. Wu: It is an easy question. She was going to PingDong. Look, here is a ticket. From Taipei to PingDong.
3. Co: But what was she going to do in PingDong?
4. Li: Maybe visit (interrupted by Wu)
5. Wu: To see her mother. Here is a picture of her mother.
6. Co: Perhaps she was just going home. She studied in Taipei.
7. R: Yes, maybe her hometown was in PingDong.
8. Li: Maybe she was going to visit (interrupted by Wu)
9. Wu: To see her...
10. Li: Hou! (banged at the table with her book) (Wu and Li's talk overlapped.)
11. R: Wu, would you please let Lin finish her talk first. You just interrupted her again.
12. Wu: Did I do that? I don't know.
13. Li: Yes, twice.
14. R: What is your idea? (looked at Lin)
15. Li: Perhaps she was going to visit her cousins or friends.

In the above excerpt, Chen came up with a question about the girl's destination, which opened up the discussion. To Chen's question, Wu first gave him feedback by judging the question and offering an answer based on the information presented in the illustration (Turn 2). Then Chou asked a follow-up question, wondering about the girl's purpose for going to PingDong (Turn 3). In response to Chou's question, Lin attempted to express her idea. However, she could not complete her talk because of Wu's interruption (Turn 4). After Wu and Chou

expressed their ideas (Turns 5, 6), Lin tried to tell the group her idea again; unfortunately, she was interrupted by Wu again (Turn 7). Lin's behavior—banging at the table with her book—and shouting—Hou!—suggested that she was mad at Wu's interruption. Through my intervention, Lin got the floor and finished her talk (Turns 11, 15). In this example, it was not easy for Lin, a less powerful student in the group, to get the floor back when Wu, a more powerful student, interrupted her talk. I intervened in the discussion to let Lin's voice be heard.

***Cutting off the topic under discussion.*** As discussed in Chapter 6, the participants sometimes interrupted their peers' talk and raised an irrelevant topic when the topic under discussion had not been finished. At times, they cut off the topic in which they were not interested. There were cases in which I intervened in the discussions when topics were cut off. For instance, while the participants discussed Libby's attitude toward her mother's interrogation in *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000), Jian interrupted Chen's talk and raised another question irrelevant to the topic. Since the topic under discussion had not been completed, I asked Jian to tell the group her question later.

1. Lo: Why did Libby not dare to look at her mother when her mother interrogated her?
2. Wu: Perhaps she realized she did a wrong thing and felt guilty. She was repenting.
3. Co: Look at this illustration. Her mother seemed so furious. Libby was appalled by her mother's terrible facial expression so...so she did not look at her mother.
4. Ch: Because she was thinking how to respond...(interrupted by Jian)
5. Ji: Was this Miss Virginia's wedding dress? (pointed at the illustration)
6. R: The topic about Libby's behavior has not been done. Tell us your question later, please. Chen, can you finish your talk?
7. Ch: She was thinking...thinking how to respond to her mother's question.
8. R: Interrogation. Probably. Okay, any other ideas?

(No more ideas were offered.)

9. R: You don't have other ideas. Jian, would you please tell us your question again?

10. Ji: This...was this Miss Virginia's wedding dress? (pointed at the illustration)

In the above excerpt, the discussion was opened up by Lo's question about Libby's behavior when she was interrogated by her mother. This question inspired Wu to join the discussion by offering a plausible reason (Turn 2). Also, Chou brought up another interpretation based on the illustration (Turn 3). Later, when Chen was telling the group his idea, Jian interrupted his talk by raising another question unrelated to the topic (Turn 4). To let Chen finish his talk and the topic be completed, I intervened in the discussion by requesting Jian to withdraw her question (Turn 6). Chen then continued his talk (Turn 7). When the topic was finished, Jian told the group her query again, which initiated another discussion (Turns 8, 10). The participants sometimes initiated an irrelevant topic when the one under discussion had not been completed. This often caused the previous topic under discussion to remain unresolved. Jian, in the above example, interrupted Chen's talk and tried to generate a new topic. Through my intervention, Chen completed his talk and the participants finished that topic.

**Facilitating the participants' discussions.** In this study, I played a variety of roles. As a participant, I shared connections I made to my life experiences. As an informer and a problem-solver, I provided knowledge and information and helped clarify confusion. Additionally, to move the participants toward "grand conversations" (Edes & Wells, 1989), I played a facilitator role. My facilitation included (a) asking the participants follow-up questions, (b) challenging their ideas, (c) helping clarify their talk, (d) restating the question, and (e) creating opportunities for low-achieving participants to express themselves. Table 18 presents types, descriptions, examples, and number of occurrences of my facilitation.

Table 18

*The Researcher's Facilitation*

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
Asking follow-up questions	I asked the participants follow-up questions to elicit more information and expand their thinking. I prompted them to articulate their thoughts.	Chou: Spider was not poisonous. Poisonous spiders live around the Amazon River. R: How do you know Spider did not live around the Amazon River?	36
Challenging the participants' ideas.	To help the participants think deeply and critically and dig deeper into their interpretations, I asked them challenging questions.	Wu: The illustrator did a bad job. Rabbits' fur is white, but this rabbit's fur is brown. R: All rabbits have white fur? Chou: Hares have brown fur.	21
Helping clarify the participants' talk	I helped the participants clarify their vague talk.	Jian: Rabbit's fur could protect her. Fox could not catch her. R: Do you mean her brown fur is a camouflage. Jian: Yes.	13
Restating the question	I restated the question when a participant's response was unrelated to the question. I restated the question when the participants' attention was distracted.	R: If you were Pig, how would you respond to Snail's teasing? (...) Chou: Let them have an exam. The winner will be the one who gets a higher score. Jian: What are you talking about? Chou: (no response) R: Listen, my question is if you were Pig, how would	13

(continued)

Table 18 (continued)

Types	Descriptions	Examples	Number of occurrences
		you respond to Snail's testing?	
Creating opportunities for low-achieving participants to express themselves	Since it was not easy for low-achieving participants to get the floor during the discussions, I invited them to share their ideas and opinions.	R: If you were Kim, how would you cross over the river? Chou: I would fly over the river. (...) R: Chen, what do you think? (...) Chen: I...diving. It was interesting.	16

*Asking follow-up questions.* To expand the participants' ideas and elicit more information, I asked follow-up questions by saying, "Why do you think so?," "Do you think...?," or "Such as?," etc. For example, while the participants talked about Peggy's behavior and attitude toward Wanda in *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), Lo considered Peggy to be silly because except making fun of Wanda, she did not know what else she could do. Wu then suggested that Peggy should do something meaningful. To expand Wu's idea, I asked him what meaningful things Peggy could do.

1. Lo: I consider Peggy to be silly because...because except making fun of Wanda, she didn't know what else she could do.
2. Wu: I agree with Lo. Peggy should do something meaningful.
3. R: Such as?
4. Wu: (thought for a few seconds) Mmm...Community service.
5. R: What kinds of community service do you think she could do?
6. Wu: (thought for a few seconds) Peggy could volunteer to help orphans in an orphanage. She would know that not every child is fortunate.

7. Co: Or ask Peggy to clean up slum areas and help people in need.
8. Ji: Peggy may change her attitude toward Wanda after interacting with people in need.

In the beginning of the conversation, Lo shared her thought about Peggy's behavior (Turn 1). Wu then expressed his agreement with Lo's thought and suggested that Peggy should do some meaningful things (Turn 2). To expand Wu's idea, I prompted Wu to tell the group what meaningful things Peggy could do (Turn 3). In response to my question, Wu suggested that Peggy could do community service (Turn 4). Since his response lacked specifics, I therefore prompted him to provide details regarding community service (Turn 5). Responding to my second follow-up question, Wu, Chou, and Jian told the group their ideas (Turns 6, 7, 8). In this example, more ideas were provided through my follow-up questions.

*Challenging the participants' ideas.* To promote the participants' higher order thinking and help them dig deeper into their interpretations, I challenged their ideas. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), in which Wu told his peers that the old woman in the illustration intended to kill Kim. I first prompted him to provide his reason for his interpretation and then I challenged him after he told the group his reason.

1. Wu: This old woman wanted to kill Kim.
2. R: Really? I am curious why you thought so?
3. Wu: She was a rogue.
4. R: Was she a rogue? Why did you think so? I don't think all rogues kill people.
5. Wu: She wore a head scarf...to cover her face. People cover their faces when doing something bad [committing crimes].
6. R: Do all people who wear head scarves intend to commit crimes?
7. Lo: Because this old woman hid a gun under her head scarf. She will shoot Kim.

8. Wu: Yes, she also hid a knife under her head scarf so she is a bad person.
9. R: You think she hid a gun and a knife under her head scarf. This sounds like she really was a rogue.
10. Ji: I disagree. Based on this illustration, there was no bulge here. (pointed at the head scarf) So she didn't hide a gun and a knife under it.

In the beginning of the above conversation, Wu shared his interpretation about the old woman's intention. Since he did not tell the group why he thought so, I prompted him to provide his reason (Turn 2). In response to my question, Wu said that the woman was a rogue (Turn 3). Since I was curious why he considered the old woman rogue, I thus prompted him to provide his reason again (Turn 4). Responding to my second question, Wu, based on the illustration, told the group his reason (Turn 5). Later, I challenged his argument (Turn 6). To my challenging question, Lo helped Wu defend his argument (Turn 7). Relating to Lo's response in terms of a weapon—a gun, Wu told the group that the old woman also hid another weapon—a knife—under her head scarf (Turn 8). However, Jian, based on the illustration, invalidated Lo and Wu's ideas, arguing that there was no bulge in the woman's head scarf so no weapon was hidden under it. In this example, my challenging question forced Wu to dig deeper into his interpretation.

***Helping clarify the participants' talk.*** During the discussions, the participants responded to one another back and forth. Before expressing their opinions and ideas, they did not always have enough time to think thoroughly. Consequently, their talk was sometimes unclear. Most of the time, they could clarify their vague meaning by themselves or through their peers' assistance. However, there were cases in which they needed my help to make their talk clear. For instance, when the participants discussed whether Uncle Jed was a liar in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997), Lo indicated that Uncle Jed was not a liar because he just pretended to cut Jean's hair with a shoe-like tool. Since the term—a shoe-like tool—confused me, I asked her to

provide a clarification. Nevertheless, she had difficulty doing so. Thus I helped her clarify her meaning.

1. Co: I think Uncle Jed was a big liar. He didn't cut Jean's hair.
2. Ji: Uncle Jed was not a liar. He didn't want to disappoint Jean so he pretended to cut her hair.
3. Lo: I agree. He couldn't cut Jean's hair with a shoe-like tool. He was not serious. (pointed at the tool that Uncle Jed held in his hand)
4. R: A shoe-like tool? What do you mean?
5. Lo: (pointed at the item in the illustration) This...I don't know...I meant a thing for helping people put on shoes.
6. R: Help people put on shoes? You meant a shoe horn?
7. Lo: Yes. Jean's hair couldn't be cut with a shoe horn. Uncle Jed just pretended to cut Jean's hair.

In the above example, Chou initiated the discussion by judging Uncle Jed, considering Uncle Jed a liar. However, Jian disagreed with Chou's judgment, arguing that Uncle Jed did not want to disappoint Jean so he pretended to cut her hair (Turn 2). Then Lo supported Jian's argument. To validate Jian's argument, she found evidence from the illustration, arguing that Uncle Jed did not intend to cut Jean's hair because a shoe-like tool could not allow him to cut her hair (Turn 3). The term—a shoe-like tool— confused me so I asked Lo to clarify her meaning (Turn 4). She tried to make her meaning clear by using a visual aid—the illustration, but she could not name the item she pointed at (Turn 5). Based on her description of the item—a thing for helping people put on shoes—I guessed that what she meant was a shoe horn (Turn 6). With my assistance, Lo accepted the term “shoe horn” as the words she meant and then clarified her meaning (Turn 7).

**Restating the question.** At times, the participants misunderstood or misheard their peers' questions. As a result, their responses were irrelevant to the questions, which often caused confusion. To help maintain the discussions, I restated questions when they elicited unrelated responses. The following excerpt is taken from a discussion of *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), in which Lin wondered why Jake, Wanda's brother, shrugged after Wanda asked him to leave. Chou came up with a response irrelevant to the question, which confused Jian. Chou paused for a while after Jian asked him to clarify his meaning. To let the discussion move forward, I restated Lin's question for Chou. Chou then confessed that he misheard the question.

1. Li: Why did Wanda's brother shrug after Wanda asked him to leave?
2. Co: Because Wanda was his sister.
3. Ji: What? I don't understand.
4. Co: Mmm (a 15-second pause) (flipped the book)
5. R: Do you understand Lin's question? Her question is, Why Wanda's brother shrugged after Wanda asked him to leave?
6. Co: Oh! I misheard her question. Mmmm...Jake probably knew Wanda was mocked by Peggy, but he didn't know how to help Wanda. He was...frustrated.
7. R: So you mean [Jake's] shrugging represented his frustration.
8. Co: Yes.

In the above excerpt, Lin generated a question about Jake's shrugging, which initiated the discussion. Lin's question motivated Chou to join the discussion by expressing his idea (Turn 2). Since Jian could not understand Chou's idea, she requested a clarification (Turn 3). However, Chou just kept flipping the book. He seemed to seek information (Turn 4). Since Chou paused for a while, I restated Lin's question to maintain the discussion (Turn 5). After listening to and understanding the question, Chou confessed that he misheard Lin's question and then told the

group his idea (Turn 6). After Chou finished his talk, I made his meaning clear (Turn 7). In this example, Chou's unrelated response to Lin's question resulted from his misinterpretation of what Lin said. Through my restating the question, he ended up generating an idea relevant to the question.

As discussed earlier, the participants' attention was easily distracted. At times, I drew their attention back to the discussions by restating questions. For example, while the participants discussed what caused the bank to go bankrupt in *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997), a butterfly flew into the classroom. Some participants attempted to catch it. Their attention was distracted. To draw their attention back to the discussion, I restated the question.

1. Wu: It must take Uncle Jed several years to save 3000 dollars. What caused this bank to go bankrupt?
2. Co: Perhaps the bank was located in a black community. Blacks had no extra money to save in the bank.
3. R: During the Great Recession, the economy was sluggish so people earned little money. They had no money to save in the bank.  
  
(A butterfly flew into the classroom.)
4. Ji: Last week...(interrupted by Chou)
5. Co: (talked to Wu) Catch it!
6. Wu: But it is flying high.
7. Lo: It is staying over there.
8. Co: Let me catch it. (left his seat)
9. R: Let it go. We are not done with Wu's question. What caused the bank to go bankrupt? Jian, what did you want to say earlier?
10. Ji: I agree with Chou. You mentioned that the Great Depression made people's financial situation worse. People had no money to save.

In the above excerpt, the discussion was initiated by Wu's question about bankruptcy. Chou first gave Wu feedback by providing a possible reason (Turn 2). Then I verified Chou's idea by providing information about the Great Depression (Turn 3). When Jian was attempting to express her thought, a butterfly flew into the classroom. Jian's talk was interrupted by Chou's shouting—Catch it (Turns 4, 5). Some participants were distracted by the butterfly (Turns 5-8). To maintain the discussion and draw their attention back to the discussion, I restated Wu's question (Turn 9). Jian then finished her talk (Turn 10) and the discussion continued.

*Creating opportunities for low-achieving participants to express themselves.* As discussed in Chapter 6, the high-achieving participants tended to talk more and it was much easier for them to take and hold the floor. Consequently, the low-achieving participants had fewer opportunities to express their ideas and thoughts. To let all participants get involved in the discussions and to allow multiple voices to be heard, I created opportunities for the low-achieving participants, Lin and Chen, to voice their ideas, especially during the first few discussion sessions. The following excerpt is from a discussion of *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), in which the participants shared their methods of crossing over a river. Since Chen sat in silence for a long while, I invited him to join the discussion.

1. R: If you were Kim, how would you cross over the river?
2. Co: I would fly over the river.
3. Wu: Nonsense. Can you fly? I would cross over the river by rowing a boat.
4. Lo: Your way is dangerous. I would cross over the river by this bridge.
5. R: So you consider your way is much safer?
6. Lo: Yes.
7. R: Chen, what do you think? If you were Kim, how would you cross the river?

8. Ch: Three ways.
9. R: Such as?
10. Ch: I...diving. It was interesting.
11. R: What a creative way. What else?
12. Ch: By a boat...and...(scratched his head) swimming.

In the above excerpt, while the participant discussed a story event about Kim's hesitation in crossing over the river, I generated a question, asking them how they would cross over the river if they were Kim. In response to my question, Chou told the group his idea—flying over the river (Turn 2). Considering Chou's idea unfeasible, Wu first criticized his idea and challenged him. Then he came up with his idea—rowing a boat (Turn 3). Considering Wu's way dangerous, Lo told the group a safer way—crossing by a bridge (Turn 4). I noticed that Chen made few contributions to this discussion meeting. To let his voice be heard, I invited him to share his ideas (Turn 7). Since Chen's response lacked specifics (Turn 8), I asked him a follow-up question to elicit more information (Turn 9). He ended up sharing his methods of crossing over the river with his peers (Turns 10, 12).

### **Summary**

McMahon and Goatley (2001) stated that student-led literature discussion requires teachers to offer contexts in which students collaborate to construct meaning through more knowledgeable others' assistance. This learning context requires students to take more responsibility for their learning. In other words, students need to adopt new methods of learning and interacting with teachers and peers. They need the teacher's guidance and direct instruction about new learning strategies before participating in a more student-centered learning context. As Sloan (2003) claimed, students cannot be expected to attain and master new learning

techniques without a teacher's guidance. In this study, the preparatory instruction, focusing on introducing discussion rules and reading comprehension and discussion strategies, was provided during the first month of the study. I modeled and reinforced these strategies and offered opportunities for the participants to practice. Even though some conflicts and difficulty emerged in the beginning, through practicing these strategies repeatedly, the participants gradually knew how to respond to and interact with one another during the discussions as well as how to interpret a text by applying the reading comprehension strategies. In addition, I modeled how to run a discussion by sharing my thoughts, inviting contributions, and encouraging connections between the text and personal experiences, etc. This served as a model for showing the participants what they would do when they ran their own discussions and what was involved in literature discussion. These findings suggest that to help the participants utilize each strategy toward the overall goal of talking with one another effectively, the teacher's guidance and opportunities for practice were crucial. These findings correspond to Maloch's (2000) study, in which the participant teacher used a variety of pedagogical techniques such as modeling, reinforcing, and elaborating to help her students realize how and when to use particular discussion strategies.

In their study, Allen, Moller, and Stroup (2003) addressed the importance of the teacher's role in facilitating student-led literature discussions. Maloch (2002) claimed that a teacher's support is crucial when students move from a teacher-centered discussion format to a more student-centered discussion style. In this study, I provided continual support for the participants after the control of the discussions was handed over to them during the last three months of the study. I scaffolded the participants' behavior in case their problematic behavior hindered the discussions. To expand their ideas and promote higher-order thinking, I asked follow-up and

challenging questions. I paid close attention to the participants' responses and interactions in order to give support to an individual who was in need of help. Moreover, I created chances for the low-achieving participants, who were less powerful students in the group, to contribute to the discussions. As Wee (2010) claimed, if a student did not talk in the group, other group members may consider the quiet student not helpful to them. Considering the preparatory instruction insufficient, I continued to offer instant assistance and moment-to-moment guidance to allow the discussions to be more successful. This assistance appeared to increase the effectiveness of the discussions.

Many scholars have suggested that when students discuss a text in a risk-free environment, they feel more comfortable telling the group their feelings and thoughts (e.g., Gruhler, 2004; Miller, 2003; Nichols, 2006). In the beginning of this study, I made an effort to create a friendly environment and helped the participants become more comfortable discussing a text. I also helped them recognize that their ideas were valuable and worth expressing (Rosenblatt, 1995). Even though tension among the participants sometimes emerged, most of the time, they expressed themselves freely in a friendly environment. Moreover, to let students' discussions more successful, the teacher should consider the discussion time. In this study, the discussion time affected the participants' level of engagement and the quality of the discussions. Compared to discussing a text in the early morning, the participants made more contributions, had more critical talk, and showed more engagement when discussing a text in the afternoon.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Discussion**

In this chapter, an overview of the study is presented first, followed by a synthesis of the findings. Last, implications of the study and conclusions are provided.

#### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe six Taiwanese fourth graders' participation in student-led literature discussions. Specifically, I intended to explore how the participants learned through peer collaboration, how they interacted with one another, how they transacted with texts, what challenges they encountered when moving from a teacher-directed classroom to in a more student-centered learning context, and what assistance the teacher-researcher offered before and during the discussions. Two key ideas guided this study: one is Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of learning, which addresses learning as a social process of collaborating with knowledgeable others (Wertsch, 1985); the other is Rosenblatt's transactional reading theory, which emphasizes a reader's particular construction of meaning as a result of his/her unique transaction with the text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Since the main purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and depict the reality of a group of fourth graders when they took part in student-led literature discussions, the research methodology guiding this inquiry was qualitative case study. The data were collected through a period of eighteen weeks, between September 2 and December 29, 2010. The data that contributed to the analysis included the transcripts of the video-taped literature discussions and the participant interviews, the researcher's field notes, and the participants' notes. A total of nine picture books and two novels were selected for this study. To look for patterns and themes in the

discussions, I utilized the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for data analysis.

During the first month of the study, the participants received explicit instruction that prepared them for operating the discussions on their own, including discussion rules, discussion strategies, and reading comprehension strategies. During this time period, I was responsible for leading the discussions. When the participants better understood how to run student-led literature discussions, I gradually released the responsibilities to them. During the last fourteen weeks of the study, the discussions were operated by the participants.

### **Syntheses of the Findings**

In this section, I address each of the research questions by synthesizing the findings.

#### **The Effectiveness of Preparatory Instruction**

Since the participants had been accustomed to learning in a teacher-centered classroom, they needed new learning techniques to participate in a more student-centered learning context. The participants were guided to use the reading comprehension strategies through direct explanation. They asked open-ended questions to initiate the discussions, enhance understanding, clarify confusion, discover new ideas, and engage themselves in higher-order thinking. They applied the making connection strategy to fuel the discussions, interpret the text, and bring their lives and worlds into the discussions. Through the use of the inferring strategy, the participants found clues in the text to support their own or other group members' arguments and combined prior knowledge/experience and information presented in the text to answer questions. The synthesizing strategy allowed the participants to review different ideas and facts from the text and then generate big ideas. In addition to the reading comprehension strategies, the participants were taught the discussion strategies, which helped maintain the discussions. They initiated

topics that were meaningful and relevant to them, asked their peers follow-up questions to elicit more information, and challenged their peers to draw out their thoughts. Through the use of the discussion strategies, the participants learned to control the discussion processes in which social interactions were involved. Moreover, a friendly environment created during the preparatory stage enabled the participants to feel free to express themselves. Their ability to make connections to their life experiences suggested that they felt comfortable sharing their personal life with other group members. These findings suggest that it was crucial to teach students strategies necessary for running student-led literature discussions. With preparatory instruction in which the reading comprehension strategies and the discussion strategies were modeled and reinforced, the participants were able to manage the discussions without being frustrated about not knowing what to say or how to make the discussions move forward. This preparatory instruction facilitated their engagement and involvement when the discussions were operated on their own.

### **The Participants' Transaction with Texts**

The participants transacted with the selected texts in a variety of ways. They relied on their life experiences and prior knowledge when making intertextual connections to a text, drew on prior knowledge to clarify unknown information they encountered in a text, shared their feelings and thoughts, judged characters and story events from a critical stance, and criticized illustrators' work. Moreover, they re-told the text to emphasize main points and found evidence from illustrations and written language to verify their arguments. These discussions offered opportunities for the participants to use the given texts in authentic ways. They were active discussants and for the most part, engaged in the discussions constructively. Without a set of questions that were created by the teacher, the participants constructed meaning of the text in

their unique ways. This finding supports Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) argument that students are more substantively engaged in literature discussions in which they are allowed to ask their own questions and construct their own meaning of the text.

Among the ways the participants transacted with the selected texts, sharing personal experiences was most evident throughout the discussions. The discussions usually began with the sharing of personal experiences and then frequently led to conflicts, problems, or the rise of other issues. Through listening to the participants' sharing of personal experiences, I better understood their backgrounds, personalities, and lives.

### **The Participants' Learning in the Discussions**

Unlike traditional literacy activities that are created and directed by a teacher with an assumed result, student-led literature discussions offered the participants opportunities to control their own learning. In this study, without my specific direction, each discussion usually occurred naturally in response to other group members' questions and comments. The participants brought their questions to the group and collaborated to resolve them by utilizing various sources. They shared their knowledge and understanding with one another, which acted to enhance and monitor their comprehension of the text. Meaning was usually created, reflected upon, and recreated during this sharing process. Furthermore, when they worked collaboratively, they learned to respect multiple perspectives on issues, develop effective communication skills, and learn how to deal with criticism. Even though some participants offered more information and knowledge than others, it is important to note that all participants got involved in the collaborative learning process. This control of learning was a powerful motivator which allowed the participants to become more involved in the reading process (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). These findings

suggest that a teacher could hand over control to students so that they could learn to think independently and engage in a greater extent to their own learning.

### **The Influence of Participants' Academic Status on Participation and Interaction**

Fairclough (1995) stated that we cannot look at language without examining power because power relationships are involved in every discursive event. Also, Lewis (2001) pointed out that when students negotiate meaning with their peers in student-led literature discussion, power relationships among group members influence their talk and interactions. In this study, a participant's academic status was a main factor that affected his/her power relationship with other group members and this relationship had an impact on how s/he expressed him/herself, challenged other group members, and responded to his/her peers with agreement or disagreement. According to Mr. Chen, Chou, Lo, and Jian were identified as higher-achieving students and were regarded as powerful figures in the classroom. They competed for the first place in every examination so that there was a rivalry among them. Their competitive relationships existed, but were seldom demonstrated publicly because there were few student-to-student interactions and small-group work in class. Their rivalry did not evoke fierce tension in the classroom. However, in this literature discussion group, there were more opportunities for these three high-achieving participants to interact and communicate with one another. Their rivalry became more intense and the power relationships among them were reflected through their interactions. To maintain their power positions within the group, there were cases in which they criticized each other's ideas with harsh words, teased their peers who had misunderstandings or who brought inaccurate information to the group, and competed for the floor. The literature discussion group created more opportunities for them to demonstrate their rivalry. Compared to Chou, Jian was less aggressive. It was easier for Chou to take Jian's floor

away when Jian challenged or expressed her disagreements with Chou's ideas. However, it was difficult for Jian to get the floor back. Through taking his rival's floor away, Chou could maintain his power position within the group in that his ideas were not challenged and opposed. Lo and Chou were more opinionated and controlling. It was not easy for them to compromise their ideas. At times, they debated and ended up in a quarrel, which resulted in tension within the group. In short, these three high-achieving participants' interactions and participation were partly influenced by their competitive relationships. During the discussions, they did not simply exchange information and share ideas with one another. They also used language to establish their power within this group, which consequently affected the ways they interacted with one another and the effectiveness of the discussions.

An imbalanced power relationship existed between high-achieving and low-achieving participants in this literature discussion group. During the discussions, the high-achieving participants had more opportunities to express themselves. Also, it was much easier for them to take away the floor from their low-achieving peers. On some occasions, they tended to control the discussions. Such problematic interactions caused not only tension but also the low-achieving participants' negative emotions, which decreased their willingness to participate. There seems to be an assumption that student-led literature discussion is a democratic context in which every student has opportunities to voice him/herself in an autonomous manner (Evans, 1996). The findings of this study suggest that not every participant had an equal chance to have his/her voice heard during the discussions. The participants' academic status was a key factor that influenced whose voices could be heard and whose voices were silenced. According to Mr. Chen, Lin and Chen, the low-achieving participants, had less power in the classroom. In this discussion group, they were still positioned as less powerful members by their high-achieving peers, which

affected their degree of participation. This finding corresponds to Evans's (1996) argument that students' social status and power relationships presented in the classroom can be re-created within a smaller group and have an impact on the discussion.

When constructing meaning of the text, the participants did not always accept their peers' interpretations. They challenged their peers' ideas either by expressing disagreements explicitly or by requesting further explanations for ideas their peers expressed. However, not all participants could become challengers. For the most part, it was the high-achieving participants who challenged their peers. The low-achieving participants seldom asked challenging questions or expressed their disagreements. In this study, Chen and Lin were identified as low-achievers. In the interview conducted on December 29, 2010, when asked: Why did you seldom express disagreements with your peers' ideas? Lin responded, "When I heard their ideas, I usually considered them reasonable. But after discussions, I sometimes [rethought their ideas and] considered their ideas unreasonable. But it was too late [to express my disagreements]." Challenging one's idea requires analyzing the text first and then speculating about the idea from different angles (Wee, 2010). It is a complex thinking process, requiring students to think analytically. Based on her response, Lin seldom challenged her peers during the discussions because she lacked sufficient time to digest her peers' ideas and then express her own disagreements, if she was opposed to their ideas. To the same question, Chen answered, "I sometimes disagreed with their ideas. But I did not want to tell them [my disagreements]." Responding to a follow-up question: Why did you not want to tell them your disagreements? Chen said, "I worried they would be mad at me. They are good students. They know much. I am not that good." According to his responses, Chen was unwilling to challenge his peers. His reluctance resulted from his worry about irritating his peers and his lack of self-confidence. His

second response suggested that he positioned his peers as powerful members, whereas positioned himself as a powerless member within the group. As discussed earlier, a social role that a participant adopted in the group affected his/her talk and interactions with other group members. Chen, who regarded himself as a powerless member, did not believe that he had sufficient power to allow him to challenge his powerful peers. To avoid offending his powerful peers, he chose not to challenge their ideas or express his disagreements. Although the low-achieving participants seldom challenged their peers, they still benefited from the discussions because they could ask follow-up questions to elicit information and share their own ideas. Nonetheless, if only high-achieving students took on the role of challenger, it could be problematic because students might assume that a role of challenger was for high-achieving students only, which may discourage other students to become challengers (McMahon & Goatley, 1995).

### **The Impact of Text Types on the Participants' Engagement in the Discussions**

The participants' level of engagement in the discussions was partly influenced by what kinds of texts they read and discussed. In this study, two novels and nine picture books were selected for the discussions. The participants showed more engagement in the discussions when the picture books were discussed since illustrations helped them initiate a variety of discussion topics and inspired them to think. They used illustrations to deepen their understanding of written texts, clarify unknown information and words, solve problems, and verify their ideas. In other words, illustrations in the selected picture books were not just decorations. They had diverse functions, which facilitated the participants' engagement in the discussions. Additionally, the participants' preference for reading the selected picture books was another reason why they showed a higher level of engagement when those books were discussed. In the interview conducted on December 29, 2010, all the participants indicated that they liked the selected

picture books more when they were asked which books they liked/disliked and why. For example, Wu said, “I like all the picture books, but I like *Yes or No* more. I like illustrations [because] they helped me understand the stories. And I could know the endings soon.” Chen responded, “I liked *Stephanie’s Ponytail* and *Yes, or No* because they are picture books. I could find interesting things from the illustrations.” These findings suggest that the image-rich picture books enhanced the participants’ motivation in reading, helped them make inferences and construct meaning, and created more possibilities for them to make contributions to the discussions. This finding supports Considine, Haley, and Lacy’s (1994) argument that illustrations in picture books help promote and maintain students’ attention and motivation in reading and discussing.

The participants were less engaged in the discussions in which the selected novels were discussed. Unlike reading and discussing the selected picture books, the participants, especially the low-achieving students, asked for more help in clarifying unknown words. They had more difficulty understanding and constructing meaning of the text because they lacked visual aids—illustrations. Without illustrations as sources for inspiration, they shared their thoughts and ideas less frequently. Moreover, some participants appeared to run out of passion and motivation when reading and discussing the last few chapters of the books. In the interview, most of the participants explicitly indicated that they did not like reading the selected novels. For instance, Lin said, “I didn’t like novels. They were too difficult for me [because there were] many new vocabulary words.” Lo replied, “I didn’t like *The Hundred Dresses*. There were just few abstract illustrations. [It was] a little bit boring.” Jian responded, “I didn’t like *The Hundred Dresses*. The story was too long and boring so I didn’t want to finish it. I couldn’t get the ending soon.” These findings suggest that the participants’ decreased engagement in discussing the selected novels

resulted from their difficulty understanding the stories and a lack of illustrations as sources for inspiration or understanding. Another reason could be that they needed to spend a lot of time finishing reading the novels. Even though the selected novels, which involved big ideas and controversial issues, had the potential for promoting the discussions, some obstacles that the participants encountered during the reading process decreased their engagement in reading and the discussions.

Even though the participants were more engaged in discussing the selected picture books, they showed different levels of engagement when those books were discussed. Basically, they had higher engagement when discussing the stories which were close to their daily lives. These books such as *Yes, or No* (Kim, 2009), *Memories* (Chen, 2000), and *Black Village and White Village* (Liou, 2006) contained characters and issues related to life experiences and backgrounds of the participants, which sparked more responses. When discussing this type of book, the participants shared more of their thoughts and made more connections to their lives. Their life experiences were sources that helped them construct meaning of the text and resolve problems. As Chou responded in the interview, “I liked *Memories* more because the story seemed to depict my life in Hualian. I could share a lot in the discussion.” This finding supports Pennac’s (2001) argument that if books make a strong connection to students’ lives, it is much easier to invite students into the world of literature.

In this study, four translated books were selected for the discussions, including *Stephanie’s Ponytail* (Munch, 1996), *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1997), *The Hundred Dresses* (Estes, 1944), and *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* (McKissack, 2000). These stories’ settings were in the United States. Since the participants were unfamiliar with the U.S., they usually sought help from me to clarify unknown information that they encountered in these

books. At times, I clarified their cultural misunderstandings. They were attentive to my talk in which information and cultures in the U.S. were provided and asked me follow-up questions to elicit more information. They exhibited genuine enthusiasm and curiosity about new cultural information. My explanations about some historical events that happened in the U.S. such as racial segregation inspired the participants to discuss some social issues in current Taiwanese society. They were able to express their own perspectives and think critically about particular social issues. These four translated books opened a window for the participants to take a closer look at people from different cultural groups. The stories and the discussions led them to understand and appreciate their own culture and the culture of others. These findings also suggest that to offer accurate information about other cultural groups to students, the teacher should understand multiple cultures and be available to clarify students' misinformation and confusion about culturally different people.

### **The Role of Mass Media in the Discussions**

In this study, the participants utilized various sources to interpret the text, solve problems, and test their peers' ideas. Mass media were one of the sources they frequently used. The participants were exposed to a variety of mass media daily, including popular TV shows, the Internet, movies, cartoons, newspapers, and so forth. During the discussions, they could use the information gained from mass media to resolve problems and clarify confusion. They brought social issues discussed frequently by mass media to the group and expressed their opinions on those issues, which allowed them to hear different perspectives on particular social issues and to reflect their own thinking. At times, knowledge taken from mass media benefited the participants' discussions. Nonetheless, mass media did not always play a beneficial role in the discussions. Misunderstandings as well as stereotypical images of particular cultural groups were

conveyed by some media, which contributed to the participants' biased opinions of those people. To make matters worse, the participants spread these stereotypes and misinformation to their peers. Since the participants had relatively little social experience, it was difficult for them to judge whether the information and images of particular people they received from mass media were accurate. Some participants latched to stereotypes they saw in cartoons, movies, or newspapers. In such situations, I facilitated the discussions by clarifying their misunderstandings and stereotypes. These findings suggest that mass media had both negative and positive influences on the participants' thinking and meaning construction. Since mass media do not always convey accurate information and authentic images of people from cultural groups, the teacher needs to clarify stereotypes and misinformation that students bring to discussions.

During the discussions, the participants demonstrated multiple ways of speaking. Most of the time, their language use was based on models of oral discourse that were projected by their teachers in the classroom. That is, they used formal language. However, there were cases in which they drew on models of oral discourse that were projected by mass media. They adopted slang they gained from TV shows to describe particular situations and express their specific meaning. They used popular evaluative terms they got from the Internet or TV shows to judge characters and their peers. On some occasions, they used foul language that they heard from movies. In the interview conducted on December 29, 2010, the participants were asked their purposes for using this language. Some of them indicated that popular terms and slang not only allowed them to express special feelings but also made them feel cool. Some participants were intensely exposed to mass media so their language use was easily affected by media's models of oral discourse. For those who had fewer chances to watch TV and movies or use the Internet, they indicated that they gained popular language from their peers. These findings suggest that

mass media's distinct models of oral discourse had an impact on the participants' language use. Even though some participants were not intensely exposed to mass media, "mass-mediated discourses" (Rymes, 2008, p. 65) still permeated their lives through their interactions with their peers who used this type of discourse. Communicative repertoires (Hymes, 1972) that were circulated via mass media became the participants' common parlance. While the teacher's model of oral discourse in the classroom enabled the participants to know how to speak appropriately in formal contexts, mass-mediated discourses allowed them to express their special meaning and feelings, which could not be presented through formal classroom discourse.

### **Factors Affecting the Teacher-Researcher's Role during the Discussions**

I, as a teacher-researcher, played varying roles when the participants engaged in their discussions. I modeled the strategies, clarified unknown information and misunderstandings, scaffolded their learning, responded to their talk, and sustained the discussions when problems emerged. I acted as a facilitator as well as a participant, but not a leader.

The participants were new to a student-centered discussion format. During the preparatory stage, my scaffolding focused on teaching them the strategies that would allow them to operate successful discussions. I explained, modeled, and reinforced each strategy to let them realize how and when to apply it. Moreover, I made an effort to create a relatively risk free discussion group. The participants knew that sharing ideas would receive a reply, but not an evaluation and their ideas, if not accepted, would be challenged in a non-combative way. In general, my facilitation in the preparatory phase was guided by my expectations for the discussions. I aimed to teach the participants to run the discussions in which they would engage in exploration and would be personally involved with the texts

When the participants were in charge of their discussions, I facilitated the discussions in a variety of ways. To promote the participants' engagement in exploratory talk, I challenged their ideas and asked follow-up questions. Instead of evaluating their responses, I prompted the participants to think deeper by asking, "Why do you think so?" or "Are you sure...?" To deepen their understanding of the stories, I raised questions requiring more critical thinking. The participants at times missed significant points in the stories so I posed important questions to turn their attention to those issues. To increase the effectiveness of the discussions, I monitored the participants' behaviors and intervened in the discussions when problematic behaviors that impeded the discussions occurred. In the beginning of the study, it was very difficult for the low-achieving students to get the floor. To avoid these students being marginalized and missing out on the benefits from the discussions, I facilitated their participation and created opportunities for them to make contributions. These students gradually contributed more to the discussions when the study went by. Furthermore, I responded to the participants' struggles with a new discussion format by scaffolding the discussion processes. It is important to note that it took time for the participants to adjust themselves to a new style of literature discussion. When they got more experiences in reading and discussing the text together, their talk became deeper and more sophisticated. Students should be given adequate time and opportunities to master techniques necessary in more student-centered discussion. As Kasten (1995) stated, "As with all new things, change may be slow. Patience is important" (p. 79). In short, my role as a facilitator was to keep the discussions on the track and to help increase the productivity of the participants' talk. I monitored them closely in order to provide proper interventions that would promote fluid discussions.

Kaufman (1996) stated that a teacher's support can inadvertently impede students' discussions if it is offered at an inappropriate time. To maximize the efficacy of my facilitation, I tried to intervene in the discussions at appropriate moments. On some occasions, my immediate intervention was necessary. For instance, when the participants' problematic behaviors that interfered with the discussions emerged, I stopped such behaviors instantly to allow the discussions to move forward. The participants sometimes brought misunderstandings to the group. Since the discussions continued to move forward and, to avoid missing opportunities to clarify those misunderstandings, I usually gave the participants corrective feedback as soon as they provided their misunderstandings. At times, quarrels occurred during the discussions. I usually let the participants deal with them because I wanted them to learn negotiation skills. I interceded only when their disputes became fierce and they could not settle them. The participants sometimes struggled to understand the text. To decrease their dependency upon me in solving their problems, I allowed more time for them to resolve their difficulties on their own. Support was not offered until they were not able to figure out solutions. To avoid hindering the discussions, I considered the timing of my intervention. The quality of the discussions could be improved when my facilitation was offered at appropriate moments.

Basically, my decisions of when to intervene in the discussions were guided by my expectations for the discussions and general goals of student-led literature discussion. Other factors such as the participants' personalities also affected the timing of my intervention. As mentioned above, I clarified the participants' misunderstandings as soon as they were brought to the group. However, my immediate corrective feedback sometimes contributed to certain participants' negative emotions. That is, some participants felt humiliated when I corrected them. There were cases in which the participants intended to stay in silence after my corrective

feedback was offered. As Chou said, “When you corrected me, I felt bad because I knew Lo and Jian would laugh at me later. I lost face.” As described previously, there was a rivalry among Chou, Jian, and Lo and they all tried hard to maintain their power positions within the group. Based on Chou’s response, my immediate corrective feedback seemed a threat to his powerful position. In fact, the issue—when and how to clarify the participants’ misunderstandings without letting them feel humiliated—bothered me at the beginning of the study. After having more interactions with the participants and understanding them better, I found that the participants who had higher self-esteem—primarily high-achievers—hardly accepted that I corrected them directly, but as for the others, they felt comfortable about receiving my direct corrections. Therefore, for certain participants, I tried not to give them my immediate corrective feedback when they said something wrong. Instead, I had the whole group collaborate to clarify misinformation and resolve misunderstandings with my assistance after a discussion topic was finished. This way seemed not to hurt those participants’ feelings much. However, it is important to note that there were cases in which the appropriate moment to intercede had already passed and the discussion had taken a different turn. As a result, some misunderstandings were never clarified. While Heubusch and Lloyd (1998) claimed that corrective feedback is most effective when it is immediate and direct, the finding of this study suggests that a teacher’s immediate corrective feedback might trigger negative emotions of students who have higher self-esteem.

### **Implications of the Study**

This study, which explored and described the participation of six fourth graders in student-led literature discussions, has the potential to contribute to both theory and practice in literacy education. The conclusions that emerged from the findings of this study have implications for reading curriculum.

## **Theoretical Implications**

This study was mainly guided by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of learning. Vygotsky (1978) argued that social interactions with knowledgeable others promote learners' cognitive development. Through meaningful talk, meaning can be constructed, mediated, and shared. In this study, collaborative learning was one of the prominent features. The participants and I facilitated one another's learning by providing information and knowledge, finding definitions of words, offering ideas and building on them, applying prior knowledge to resolve problems, and so on. Through interactions with their peers, the participants had opportunities to develop new understanding as well as monitor their own thinking when they articulated their knowledge for their peers. This study supports the notion that knowledge is socially constructed and learning is socially interdependent. Even though the findings of this study support Vygotsky's learning theory that learners can reach their potential development levels through collaboration with knowledgeable peers, it is important to note that peer collaboration in this study did not always lead to successful interaction. Factors such as the participants' ambiguous explanations and their impatience in teaching their peers often contributed to unsuccessful facilitation. Although the students were in charge of their discussions, the teacher still had the responsibility to facilitate successful learning and interactions among students. To maximize their growth, this study suggests that the teacher should recognize students' varying background knowledge, preferences in learning, and interests and utilize multiple ways to help them progress within their zones of proximal development.

Another theoretical principle guiding this study was Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional reading theory. According to Rosenblatt (1995), readers' life experiences, preoccupations, beliefs, and values influence how they interpret a text. The findings of this study support

Rosenblatt's argument. However, other factors such as how students positioned themselves within the group and their social relationships with other group members also have an impact on their responses to the text. In the transactional reading theory, Rosenblatt placed an emphasis on reading comprehension as the transaction between the reader and the text, but she did little to explain how readers engage in texts. In this study, the participants were engaged in the assigned texts in various ways. A teacher can instruct students to make connections to the text, find evidence from the text to verify their arguments, re-read the text to attain more detailed information, and react to the characters and their actions. The transactional reading theory is generally applied to written texts, but the findings of this study suggest that this theory can also be applied to illustrations in picture books. A teacher can help students read illustrations in an analytic way by examining art styles and techniques and respond to them in an aesthetic way by expressing their feelings and emotions.

### **Educational Implications**

**Creating new roles for students in the learning process.** According to Purves (1993), in traditional reading classrooms, teachers control students' learning. They decide what students should learn and give them tests to determine how much they have learned. Unlike traditional reading classrooms, students are given ownership of their learning in student-led literature discussion. In this study, the participants were positioned at the center of learning. Even though they were given a structure for the discussions, there was flexibility for them to operate the discussions in their own ways within this framework. They built knowledge collaboratively, decided what they wanted to learn and the way they learned, and searched and utilized sources of information as guides for understanding. Through participation in the discussions, they came to realize that there were multiple ways of knowing and multiple references for guiding their

understanding. Teachers were not the only knowledgeable others and texts were not the only sources of knowledge. Peer collaboration was a crucial scaffold for the participants' growth to independence in learning. Although they initially were uncomfortable without my specific direction and usually asked for my confirmation about their thoughts, they gradually came to understand that their peers' knowledge was valid and their talk was a valuable tool for learning. Social interactions helped the participants develop their own "inner voice" (Barnes, 1992) to guide their own learning and reading. If educators attempt to shift the control for learning to students, they should promote students' level of independence with respect of learning. A teacher should allow a myriad of types of purposeful talk (Henson, 1993). Moreover, a teacher needs patience and needs to offer more time for students when they are developing a new understanding of this type of learning and their roles as independent learners.

**Trusting students in their abilities to manage their own discussions.** As previously mentioned, the teacher is often the only decision maker in a traditional classroom. Teachers ask questions, establish learning procedures, assign readings, and so on. For some teachers, sharing control with students is not easy (Freedman, 1993). They are afraid that students cannot respond to a text without specific guidance or will waste their time in off-task behaviors. When I conducted this study in school, several of my colleagues expressed doubt that Taiwanese students could say something meaningful in discussions. They considered Taiwanese students shy in expressing themselves and incapable of controlling or guiding their own learning. In this study, even though the participants sometimes were not able to deal with their difficulties on their own and some problematic interactions that hindered their discussions sometimes emerged, it was evident that they could share ideas, collaborate to solve problems, discuss critical issues, and create new ways of thinking about the texts. They demonstrated the ability to read, think,

respond, and construct meaning in a more student-centered learning context. They were able to guide their own discussions without my specific guidance. Their discussions became more productive over time. These findings suggest that educators need to trust that students can identify significant points in a text and share experiences related to what they have read. If literature discussion is always controlled by the teacher, students will not learn to make meaningful personal responses to literature because they will tend to become too concerned about whether their responses meet their teacher's expectations. If we want students to become independent learners, we must trust their abilities to manage their discussions and control their own learning. Otherwise, they will always rely on authority figures to guide their learning. Students cannot learn to take responsibility for their learning if they are never given any opportunities to do so. Finally, it is important to note that trusting students' abilities to operate their own discussions does not mean that the teacher relinquishes all control. The teacher can find appropriate moments to intervene and restrict students' problematic participation when it occurs.

**Selecting texts.** The selection of texts is an important contributor to successful discussion in that student talk is closely associated with types of books they read. Selecting reading materials is a complicated process because many factors should be taken into consideration. In this study, the participants preferred to read picture books because illustrations were sources for their thinking and inspiration. They showed higher engagement when the selected picture books were discussed, especially the picture books on familiar topics. Their reading preferences had an impact on their engagement in discussion. Before selecting texts for students, a teacher should know students' interests and reading preferences since students are more likely to be more engaged in reading and discussing stories they like. For elementary students who are beginning

to run student-led literature discussion, a teacher can select quality picture books for them. As this study found, picture books have more possibilities for increasing beginners' enjoyment, which tends to help them maintain their motivation. The findings of this study suggest that illustrations in picture books serve many functions such as helping readers understand written texts, providing useful information, and evoking readers' emotions and feelings. A teacher can assist students in using illustrations to aid in their understanding. If students can make use of illustrations, their discussions can be fueled more easily.

In addition to choosing texts based on students' reading preferences and interests, a teacher should consider students' capacity for comprehension when selecting reading materials. In this study, two lengthy novels were selected for the discussions. Some participants complained that the stories were too long and difficult. They showed relatively low motivation and engagement in the discussions of these two books. To maintain students' motivation, it is important to match the text to their reading ability and overall knowledge base. Also, texts should be organized by length and complexity. It is better to begin with simple and shorter texts and progress to longer and more complex ones.

Even though the participants displayed less engagement in reading and discussing the selected novels, they raised and discussed some critical issues when discussing *A Vietnamese Kid* (Chang, 2009), a multicultural children's book describing one of the important issues in current Taiwanese society: New Taiwanese Immigrant children and foreign brides. To stimulate students' critical thinking, a teacher can choose books containing critical, controversial issues. As Greenberg (2002) stated, engaging students in discussing critical issues can promote productive talk, especially when these critical issues are involved in literature or are raised through reading literature.

**Finding authentic ways to monitor students' growth.** In Taiwan, the Chinese curriculum in elementary school is designed based on the National Curriculum Guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education. Teachers are expected to teach a list of skills that students must master before they advance to the next grade level. A paper-and-pencil examination is the most common way to test whether students obtain requisite skills. However, some skills such as critical, independent thinking are difficult to test through paper-and-pencil examinations. Also, in this type of examination, students are often asked to use rote memorization, but not to apply other skills they might learn. In this study, the participants had many opportunities to demonstrate their literacy skills. Student-led literature discussion can be a means for a teacher to monitor and evaluate students' literacy development. For instance, if a particular skill requests students to demonstrate their ability to evaluate a story, a teacher can observe students and discern whether they are able to express their judgments about characters and their actions. Through analyzing students' reading logs, a teacher can determine whether students are able to use vocabulary precisely. Student-led literature discussion provides a teacher with authentic ways to monitor students' growth and evaluate their performance.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitation of this study is about the issue of generalizability. This study centered on student-led literature discussions operated by six Taiwanese fourth graders who were observed during a short period of time in an out-of-classroom learning context in which Mandarin (traditional Chinese) was used as a communication tool. This study merely reflects one group of students' peer-led literature discussions. It is impossible to generalize from this study to other peer-led literature discussion groups. This qualitative inquiry aims to provide a rich description of a particular setting, but not a generalizable "truth."

Another limitation of this study is my own bias. During the first phase of the study, Mr. Chen provided me with detailed information about the participants, including their family backgrounds, academic performance, academic strengths and weaknesses, social relationships with other classmates, and their personalities. Additionally, during my interviews with them, the participants shared with me their personal lives such as likes/dislikes, reading preferences, and general habits. I brought this information to the study, which may have impacted my data analysis.

### **Conclusions**

The participants entered this study with no prior experience with student-led literature discussion. Also, they were accustomed to obeying commands from people in positions of authority and had few opportunities to express themselves in class. However, within the time frame of eighteen weeks, they developed an understanding of the discussion process, managed their discussions in which communication and interaction skills were needed, resolved problems collaboratively with a variety of sources, and applied reading comprehension strategies to interpret the selected texts. In the process of meaning negotiation, they shared different ways of thinking, listened to views of others, valued ideas different from their own, advocated their own beliefs, and showed an understanding of others' perspectives. Within this learning community, reading became a purposeful meaning-constructing activity in which they developed multiple interpretations, mediated understanding of social issues, and promoted reasoning skills. Their growth in this short period of time demonstrated the potential benefits of implementing student-led literature discussion into classrooms. Student-led literature discussion can become a regular literacy activity in which peer collaboration is encouraged, personal perspectives are respected and valued, and higher order thinking can be promoted.

Student-led literature discussion is promoted since it provides students with opportunities to express themselves and requires students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Nevertheless, this study suggests that students face some challenges when moving from a teacher-directed structure to a more student-centered learning context. The transition to a student-directed discussion format is not easy. The study reported here offers a look at how I, as a facilitator, prepared the students for the discussions and what continual support I offered when the students operated their own discussions. The participants encountered some challenges when transitioning to a more student-centered discussion format. My scaffold was needed when they developed new skills and adjusted themselves to new norms and expectations for participation.

### **Possibilities for Future Study**

This study was conducted in an out-of-classroom context. Future research can be conducted in classrooms with a focus on how Taiwanese elementary teachers implement literature discussion, how they adopt different instructional approaches to prepare their students for literature discussion and their perceptions and attitudes toward using literature discussion as an instructional method. More and more New Taiwanese Immigrant children enroll in elementary schools. Future research can explore the effects of these minority students' identities and non-mainstream cultural backgrounds on literature discussion. In this study, the participants were able to express their opinions and to challenge their peers in peer-led literature discussion. However, the research design of this study did not allow me to investigate whether the participants were more willing to express themselves in whole-class discussions, which were led by Mr. Chen. Future research can examine how peer-led literature discussion affects students' participation in whole-class discussion. In this study, a self-evaluation activity was not held at the end of each discussion. The participants did not evaluate their own contributions to the

discussions so they had no clear idea about what could be improved in the next discussion.

Future research can document how students do self evaluations and investigate the effects of self-evaluation activities on discussion.

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**Appendix A**  
**School Day Schedule**

8:00-8:30	Open-day Activities
8:30-8:40	Recess
8:40-9:20	The First Class
9:20-9:30	Recess
9:30-10:10	The Second Class
10:10-10:20	Recess
10:20-11:00	The Third Class
11:00-11:10	Recess
11:10-11:50	The Fourth Class
11:50-12:00	Prepare for Lunch
12:00-1:10	Lunch
1:10-1:20	Recess
1:20-2:00	The Fifth Class
2:00-2:10	Recess
2:10-2:50	The Sixth Class
2:50-3:00	Recess
3:00-3:40	The Seventh Class

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions for the First Phase of the Study**

- 1) Do you like reading? Why?
- 2) Do your parents buy you story books? Do they read to you?
- 3) How many people in your family? Do you have any sibling?
- 4) What are your hobbies?
- 5) What is your parents' expectation to you?

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions for the Third Phase of the Study**

- 1) What book(s) did you like/dislike? Why?
- 2) What was your attitude toward participating in the discussions?
- 3) What was your attitude toward negotiating meaning with your peers?
- 4) What was your attitude toward your peers' disagreements or challenging questions?
- 5) In what situations, you did not want to make contributions to the discussions?
- 6) Why did you use popular terms and slang? How did you learn these terms?
- 7) Why did you seldom challenge your peers? (For Chen and Lin only)