**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**EXPLORING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNERS' ROLES
AND READING CIRCLE'S TASKS**Zeng Jincheng^{1*}, Noor Hanim Rahmat²¹ Foreign Language Studies, Hunan University of Humanities, Science & Technology, China

Email: zjcmy@126.com

² Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Email: noorh763@uitm.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 30.07.2025

Revised date: 20.08.2025

Accepted date: 22.09.2025

Published date: 20.10.2025

To cite this document:

Jincheng, Z., & Rahmat, N. H. (2025).
Exploring Relationship Between
Learners' Roles and Reading Circle's
Tasks. *International Journal of
Education, Psychology and
Counseling*, 10 (60), 673-683.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1060049This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This study examines the relationship between learners' roles and tasks in Reading Circles (RCs) within China's EFL context, where teacher-centred instruction prevails. The quantitative survey analysed 431 Chinese college EFL learners' perceptions of RC roles and tasks after a semester-long intervention using a 31-item Likert-scale survey. Results showed structured roles (e.g., Summarizer, Discussion Leader) significantly increased engagement ($p < .01$) and reduced anxiety ($d = 0.42$), though complex tasks (e.g., Connector) elicited lower confidence. Over 70% endorsed role rotation, but 35% struggled with dense texts, highlighting the need for pre-reading supports. Learners demonstrated greater autonomy and critical thinking skills through collaborative role-based activities, with participation rates increasing by 40% compared to traditional reading instruction. However, cultural factors such as reluctance to express dissenting opinions and preference for teacher validation influenced role effectiveness. Key pedagogical implications include scaffolding roles by proficiency level, integrating metacognitive strategies to enhance reading comprehension, and blending group collaboration with individual accountability tasks to optimize learning outcomes. Future research should explore the implementation of hybrid RC-digital models that incorporate technology-enhanced features and investigate the longitudinal effects of sustained RC practice on learners' reading proficiency and autonomous learning capabilities in diverse EFL contexts.

Keywords:

Reading Circle; Reading Tasks; Learner's Role; EFL

Introduction

In China, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has long emphasized teacher-centred instruction, often neglecting student engagement and collaborative learning (Chen Hsieh et al., 2017). Reading Circles (RCs), a student-centred approach rooted in sociocultural theory, have gained attention for their potential to reduce anxiety, enhance participation, and improve learning outcomes in EFL contexts (Kang et al., 2023; Shelton-Strong, 2012). However, while RCs have been widely studied in Western and other Asian settings (e.g., Korea, Taiwan), their application in Chinese college level education remains underexplored, particularly regarding how learners perceive their roles and tasks within this framework (Chou, 2022). This gap is critical, as cultural and educational differences may influence the effectiveness of RC implementation.

Despite the documented benefits of RCs, such as fostering autonomy, critical thinking, and collaborative skills (Daniels, 2023; Su et al., 2019), few studies have examined the interplay between learner roles and tasks in Chinese EFL classrooms. Existing research highlights role-specific advantages (e.g., summarizers improving comprehension, connectors enhancing cultural awareness) but overlooks learners' perceptions of these roles and their alignment with task design (Le, 2021; Rahayu & Suryanto, 2021). For instance, while roles like Discussion Leader and Vocabulary Enricher are structured to promote engagement, their perceived utility and relationship to task outcomes remain unclear in China's exam-driven educational context (Xu, 2021). By drawing on empirical evidence from RC implementations in similar contexts (e.g., Kang et al., 2023; Chou, 2023), this study seeks to provide actionable insights for adapting RCs to China's EFL landscape, ultimately enhancing learner engagement and reading proficiency.

Research Questions

This study is done to explore Chinese EFL learners' perceptions of their roles and tasks in RCs and analyse the relationship between the two. Specifically, it addresses three research questions:

RQ1: How do learners perceive their roles in RC activities?

RQ2: How do they perceive the tasks?

RQ3: Is there a significant relationship between roles and tasks?

Literature Review

This section reviews previous research on reading circles, learners' roles, and tasks before presenting the study's conceptual framework.

Reading Circle

Many studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of Reading Circles (RCs) in foreign language (FL) learning, particularly in terms of (a) enhancing reading comprehension and engagement and (b) developing learner autonomy and critical thinking skills. For example, Kang et al. (2023) examined the impact of RCs on 39 first-year Korean university students in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses using surveys and interviews. The findings revealed that students with prior RC experience showed lower anxiety and higher engagement, suggesting that structured peer discussions improve learning outcomes. Similarly, Chou (2022) adopted a quasi-experimental design with 60 first-year students reading two graded readers and found that RCs offered EFL learners a way to build linguistic and cultural schemata, to develop and practice reading strategies, to enhance main-idea comprehension, and to form long-term

memories for retention. These studies highlight RCs as a valuable pedagogical tool for fostering collaborative and autonomous learning in FL classrooms.

Learners' Roles and Tasks

There have been many past studies on learner roles in Reading Circles. The study by Shelton-Strong (2012) investigated how structured roles (e.g., Discussion Leader, Word Master) influenced EFL learners' engagement and comprehension. The research involved 48 Vietnamese university students participating in weekly RC sessions over a semester. Using role-specific task sheets and post-discussion reflections, the study found that rotating roles enhanced students' metacognitive awareness and text comprehension. The implication is that role differentiation helps learners focus on specific reading strategies while maintaining group cohesion. Another study by Chou (2022) explored how RC roles affected reading strategy use among 30 Taiwanese intermediate EFL learners. Using pre- and post-tests, as well as role-based worksheets, the study found that roles like Summarizer and Connector reinforced comprehension through summarization and real-world connections. This suggests that well-defined roles scaffold learners' ability to process texts deeply.

Past research has also examined the design and perception of tasks in Reading Circles. The study by Le (2021) analyzed how L2 learners negotiated task-related identities during RC discussions, focusing on eight ESL students in an academic reading class. Using conversation analysis of six RC sessions, the study found that learners dynamically adapted their roles (e.g., shifting from Vocabulary Enricher to Discussion Leader) to manage group interactions. This implies that task flexibility enhances participation and meaning making. Similarly, Xu (2021) investigated task design in RCs for Chinese EFL learners, comparing traditional and online RC formats with 116 university students. Through comprehension tests and questionnaires, the study found that structured tasks (e.g., guided role sheets) improved reading performance more than unstructured discussions. The findings suggest that clear task guidelines are crucial for learners in exam-oriented contexts.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that Reading Circles enhance FL learning through structured roles and collaborative tasks. However, gaps remain in understanding how learners perceive their roles and tasks in different reading activities and the relationship between specific tasks and learning outcomes. This study aims to address these gaps by analyzing Chinese EFL learners' experiences with RC roles and tasks.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the conceptual framework that learners' assigned roles in RCs influence their engagement in reading activities, their apprehension toward reading tasks, and their attitude and perceived usefulness of RC as a learning strategy. Drawing on sociocultural theory (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022), which emphasizes collaborative learning and scaffolding, this framework posits that structured role shape learners' cognitive and affective responses to reading tasks. Previous research supports this notion: Kang et al. (2023) found that students with RC experience exhibited lower anxiety and higher engagement, suggesting that role-based participation mitigates apprehension. Similarly, Shelton-Strong (2012) demonstrated that role differentiation enhances metacognitive awareness and text comprehension, reinforcing the link between task design and perceived usefulness. Furthermore, Xu (2021) highlighted that structured RC tasks improve reading performance in exam-oriented contexts, indicating that role clarity fosters engagement.

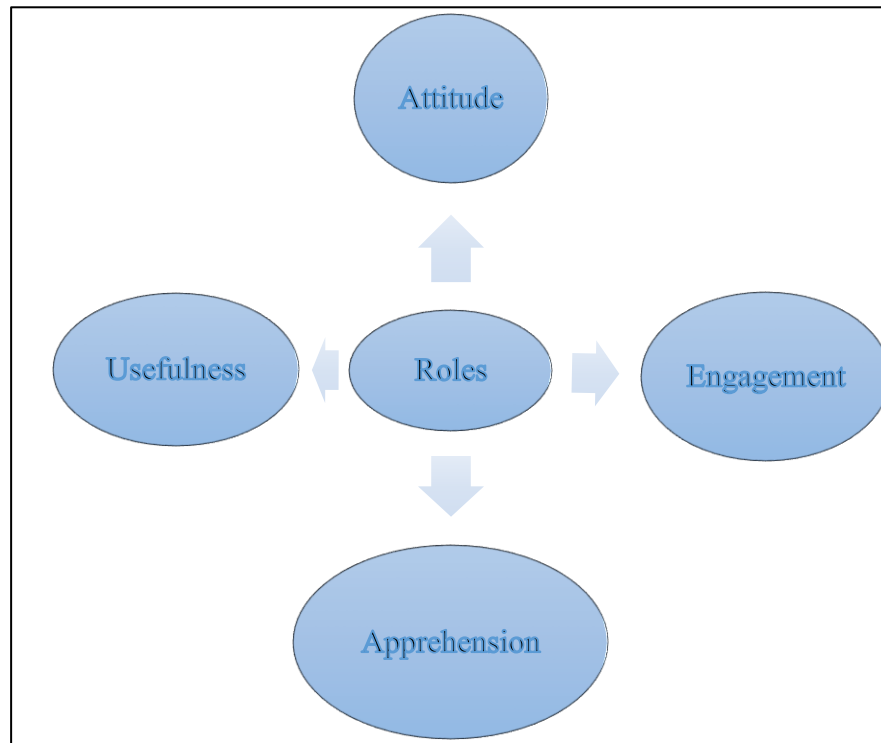


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study-Relationship Between Learners' Roles and Reading Circle Tasks

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore how learners perceive their roles and tasks in different reading activities and the relationship between specific tasks and learning outcomes. A purposive sample of 431 participants who took part in RC for a semester were responded to the survey by the end of the semester. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from (Kang et al., 2023) to reveal the variables in table 1 below. The survey contains 31 items across 6 sections: demographic profile (Section A), students' perception of their roles in RC (Section B, 6 items), attitude toward RC (Section C, 7 items), engagement toward RC (Section D, 6 items), apprehension towards reading tasks (Section E, 6 items), and perceived usefulness of RC (Section F, 6 items).

Table 1- Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECTION	HEADING	NO. OF ITEMS	Cronbach Alpha
B	Role in RC (BRQ)	6	.943
C	Attitude (CPQ)	7	.750
D	Engagement (CEQ)	6	.891
E	Apprehension (CQQ)	6	.904
F	Usefulness (CUQ)	6	.953
		31	.921

Table 1 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows Cronbach alpha scores of .921, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

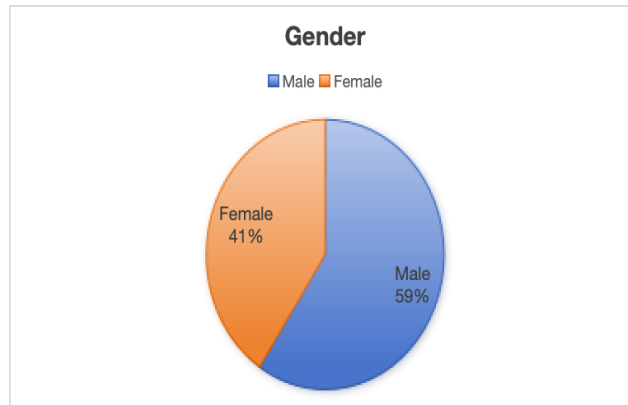


Figure 1- Percentage for Gender

It was noted that there are more female than male respondents in this study with a difference of 18.6 percent (Figure 1). Male students recorded only 41 percent ($n=175$) compared to females with 59 percent ($n=256$).

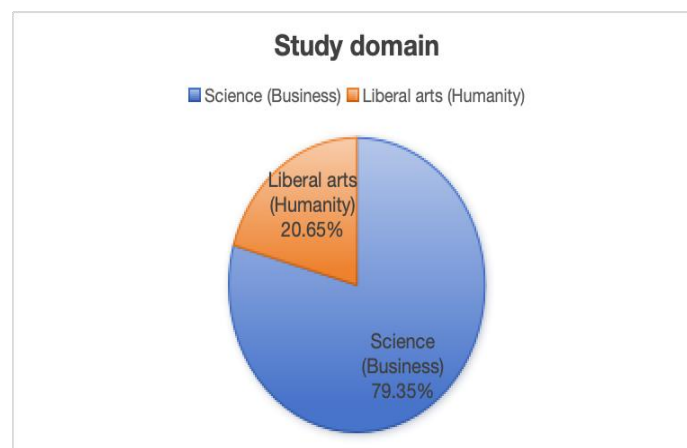


Figure 2- Percentage for Study Domain

Figure 2 indicates that 79.35% of participants were business majors, whereas only 20.65% were humanities majors.

Findings for Students' Perception on Their Roles in RC

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive their roles in the Reading Circle activities?

Table 2- Mean for Students' Perception on Their Role in RC

ITEM	Mean
BRQ1 I can fulfil my role as a group leader.	3.7
BRQ2 I can fulfil my role as a passage person.	3.9
BRQ3 I can fulfil my role as a word master.	3.8
BRQ4 I can fulfil my role as a summarizer.	3.8
BRQ5 I can fulfil my role as a culture collector.	3.8
BRQ6 I can fulfil my role as a connector.	3.8

Table 2 presents students' perceptions of their ability to perform different roles in RC. Overall, the mean scores indicate that learners felt confident in fulfilling their assigned responsibilities, with all items rated between 3.7 and 3.9. The highest rating was given to the role of passage person (mean = 3.9), followed closely by word master, summarizer, culture collector, and connector (all means = 3.8). The role of group leader received the lowest but still relatively high mean score (3.7). These results suggest that students generally perceived themselves as capable of managing various RC roles, with only minor variations across specific responsibilities.

Findings for Learners' Perception on the Reading Tasks

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do learners perceive the task in Reading Circle? In the context of this study, reading circle tasks are measured by students' attitudes, engagement, apprehension and usefulness.

Table 3- Mean for Attitude

ITEM	Mean
CPQ1 Reading circles help improve my English language arts abilities.	4
CPQ 2 Through the reading circles, I am exposed to a lot of new vocabulary.	4
CPQ 3 Reading circles help create a more comfortable learning environment.	3.9
CPQ 4 Reading circles help ease my fear of English texts in the class.	3.8
CPQ 5 I feel uncomfortable with reading circles because I can't understand their purpose.	3
CPQ 6 I feel uncomfortable with reading circles because I don't like discussing in groups.	2.7
CPQ 7 I feel uncomfortable with reading circles because I learn more through teacher-centred learning.	2.9

Table 3 reports students' attitudes toward RC. Overall, learners expressed positive perceptions, with the highest mean scores indicating that RC was seen as beneficial for improving English language arts abilities (mean = 4.0) and expanding vocabulary (mean = 4.0). Students also valued RC for creating a more comfortable learning environment (mean = 3.9) and for reducing fear of English texts in class (mean = 3.8). In contrast, negative items received notably lower ratings, including discomfort due to unclear purpose (mean = 3.0), preference for teacher-

centred learning (mean = 2.9), and dislike of group discussion (mean = 2.7). These findings suggest that learners generally hold favourable attitudes toward RC, particularly in terms of language development and classroom climate, while only a minority expressed reservations about its purpose or group-based format.”

Table 4- Mean for Engagement

ITEM	Mean
CEQ 1 Reading circles are enjoyable.	3.8
CEQ 2 Learning new English and knowledge is interesting.	4
CEQ 3 I am curious as to what I will learn in reading circles.	3.8
CEQ 4 I feel reading class time is short.	3.4
CEQ 5 Reading texts together is a good way to learn something new.	3.9
CEQ 6 If the text is interesting; I try to read it despite the difficulty.	4

Table 4 presents the learners’ mean levels of engagement in RC activities. The data reveal that students find acquiring new English language skills and knowledge particularly interesting. Furthermore, when a text is perceived as interesting, students are inclined to read it despite potential difficulties, with both items receiving the highest mean score (=4). These findings underscore the crucial role of interest in fostering engagement. In addition, learners reported that reading class time felt relatively short (mean = 3.4), further suggesting their sustained involvement in the tasks.

Table 5- Mean for Apprehension

ITEM	Mean
CQQ1 I am afraid that the teacher will point out my reading understanding mistakes.	3.1
CQQ2 I am uncomfortable reading English because I may not understand the text.	3.2
CQQ3 Sometimes I forget what I know in the class because of tension.	3.4
CQQ4 I get nervous when I think of having to read English texts.	3.1
CQQ5 I feel uneasy when I’m in class.	2.8
CQQ6 I am anxious when I have to talk with the teacher and fellow classmates in class.	2.8

Table 5 summarizes learners’ mean apprehension toward reading tasks. Overall, the results suggest a moderate level of reading-related anxiety. The highest mean score (3.4) was observed for the item “Sometimes I forget what I know in the class because of tension,” indicating that tension may hinder learners’ ability to retrieve knowledge during reading activities. Concerns about not understanding the text (mean = 3.2) and fear of being corrected by the teacher (mean = 3.1) were also relatively common. Similarly, learners reported nervousness when anticipating reading English texts (mean = 3.1). In contrast, lower mean scores were recorded for feeling uneasy in class (mean = 2.8) and anxiety when interacting with teachers or peers (mean = 2.8), suggesting that classroom environment and peer interaction may be less anxiety-inducing compared with comprehension-related challenges.

Table 6- Mean for Usefulness

	Mean
CUQ1 Reading circles promotes discussion of ideas and interaction.	3.9
CUQ2 Reading circles helps me understand vocabulary and expressions.	3.9
CUQ3 Reading circles helps me understand the text ideas and content.	3.8
CUQ4 Reading circles promotes collaboration with others.	4
CUQ5 Reading circles help create a pleasant classroom learning environment.	3.9
CUQ6 Reading circles improves my English competencies.	3.9

Table 6 presents learners' perceptions of the usefulness of RC activities. Overall, the mean scores indicate that students generally regarded RC as highly beneficial, with all items rated close to or above 3.8. The highest score was recorded for the item "RC promotes collaboration with others" (mean = 4.0), highlighting the role of RC in fostering cooperative learning. Other aspects, such as promoting discussion and interaction (mean = 3.9), facilitating vocabulary and expression learning (mean = 3.9), enhancing comprehension of textual ideas and content (mean = 3.8), and contributing to a pleasant classroom environment (mean = 3.9), also received consistently high ratings. In addition, students acknowledged that RC improved their overall English competencies (mean = 3.9). These results suggest that learners perceived RC activities as both pedagogically effective and socially supportive in the reading classroom.

Findings for Relationship Between Roles and Tasks in RC

This section presents data to answer research question 3- Is there a relationship between roles and tasks in Reading Circle?

To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between roles and attitude, engagement, apprehension, and perceived usefulness of RC respectively, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 7 below.

Table 7- Correlation Between Roles and Tasks in Reading Circle

		ATTITUDE	ENGAGEMENT	APPREHENSION	USEFULNESS
ROLE	Pearson	.536**	.533**	-.001	.501**
	(Correlation)				
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	292	292	292	292

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (-2 tailed)

With reference to Table 7 above, correlation analyses revealed significant associations between RC roles and several learner variables. A strong positive correlation was found between role and attitude ($r = .536$, $p < .001$), role and engagement ($r = .533$, $p < .001$), as well as role and perceived usefulness ($r = .501$, $p < .001$), indicating that learners' roles were closely linked to more positive attitudes, higher engagement, and greater perceived benefits of RC activities. In contrast, the correlation between role and apprehension was negligible and not significant ($r =$

-.001, $p > .05$), suggesting that role assignment did not contribute to reducing learners' anxiety. Overall, these findings suggest that RC roles are instrumental in enhancing learners' cognitive and affective engagement, though their impact on apprehension remains limited.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

This study examined learners' perceptions of Reading Circle (RC) activities, focusing on their views of RC roles, tasks, and the relationship between the two. The following session summarizes the findings with discussion.

Learners' Perception of RC Roles (RQ1)

Students generally felt confident in managing different RC roles, with only minor variations in perceived difficulty across responsibilities. This suggests that RC roles are well-structured and accessible, facilitating participation. This aligns with Daniels (2023) literature circle framework, which highlights how structured roles (e.g., Discussion Leader, Summarizer) scaffold student engagement. The slight variations in role difficulty may reflect differing cognitive demands, supporting Shelton-Strong's (2012) observation that some roles (e.g., Discussion Leader) require more linguistic or analytical effort than others (e.g., Vocabulary Enricher).

Learners' Perception of RC Tasks (RQ2)

Learners held highly favourable attitudes toward RC, particularly valuing its impact on language development and classroom climate. While learners reported moderate reading-related anxiety, this was primarily linked to comprehension challenges rather than social interactions. These findings resonate with Xu (2021), which found that RC enhances vocabulary acquisition and reading fluency through repeated exposure and discussion. However, the persistence of comprehension-related anxiety supports Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which claims that while collaborative structures lower social anxiety, text difficulty remains a separate challenge. That is to say, RC reduces classroom anxiety but may not fully mitigate struggles with complex texts (Khonamri et al., 2024).

Relationship Between RC Roles and Tasks (RQ3)

RC roles significantly enhanced cognitive and affective engagement, reinforcing their value in collaborative learning. However, their impact on reducing reading apprehension was limited, suggesting that while roles facilitate discussion, they may not fully alleviate comprehension-related anxiety. This supports Fredricks (2011)'s engagement framework, where structured tasks promote behavioural (participation), emotional (enjoyment), and cognitive (deep processing) involvement. Yet, the limited effect on apprehension indicates that collaborative reading reduces speaking anxiety but does not automatically improve comprehension confidence (LeBlanc, 2015).

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The findings of this study highlight several pedagogical implications for implementing RC in EFL classrooms. First, educators should scaffold role assignments by gradually increasing complexity (e.g., starting with Summarizer before advancing to Discussion Leader) to accommodate varying learner proficiencies (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Second, since RC tasks enhance engagement but do not fully mitigate reading-related anxiety, instructors should

integrate pre-reading supports (e.g., vocabulary previews, guided annotations) and metacognitive strategy instruction (e.g., inferencing, self-questioning) to bolster comprehension confidence (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Third, to address resistance to collaborative learning, a blended approach combining group discussions with individual reflection tasks can cater to diverse learner preferences. Additionally, fostering a low-anxiety environment through structured peer feedback and teacher modelling can maximize participation.

For future research, longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether RC's benefits (e.g., engagement, reduced anxiety) persist over time. Experimental designs that test hybrid models, such as RC combined with digital annotation tools, may further optimize comprehension and critical thinking outcomes. Finally, incorporating multimodal data (e.g., eye-tracking during reading, peer dialogue analysis) could provide deeper insights into cognitive and social processes during RC tasks.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge and extended special gratitude to Hunan Provincial Education Department, who provide fund for the Higher Education Teaching Reform Research Project (No. HNJG-20231197).

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