

## Media Circles: Lively, Learner-Led Lessons

by ADAM BRAZENAS

*Media circles* (MCs) are an adaptation of an extensive-reading activity popularly known as *literature circles* (Daniels 1994). Literature circles have been successful in general-education classes but have also gained traction in the field of English language teaching (ELT), particularly in Asian universities (Mark 2007; Shelton-Strong 2012). Literature circles can be thought of as a book club with specific roles assigned to each student in preparation for the discussion of literature. The overarching goal is to inspire a love for reading while encouraging students to engage in thoughtful discussion. MCs aim to accomplish similar goals, albeit by using audiovisual media in place of literary material.

MCs are inherently organic. With limited teacher guidance, students will engage with their peers, which will motivate them to ask each other for help or clarification, negotiate meaning, and ask open-ended questions in order to stimulate a dialogue. Moreover, the audiovisual materials chosen for the assignment should not be overly academic or technical. In fact, such materials would defeat the purpose of the activity. The idea is for students to be able to comprehend the material relatively comfortably, focusing on nuanced concepts such as idiomatic language, cultural idiosyncrasies, and the subtleties of the relationships between characters, and at the same time make connections between the content of the media and the real world. As such, MCs work best with intermediate L2 students or higher and can be especially

useful in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, as they provide a much-needed opportunity for practicing the target language outside the classroom.

In my own case, MCs were used in a Chinese university oral English course. The students were not English majors, although all of them *did* major in another foreign language (e.g., French, Italian, or Russian). Therefore, these students were not lacking in language-learning strategies. As such, this learner-led activity was a major success; it can be adapted to suit the needs of less-experienced students with the aid of sufficient scaffolding by the instructor.

### PROCEDURE

For this activity, just as with literature circles, students will form groups of five and assign specific roles (Daniels 2002). Next, rather than reading a literary selection, students will view one episode of a TV series chosen by the instructor *as homework*. The choice of series is at the discretion of the instructor. However, a few series I suggest are *Boy Meets World*, *Smart Guy*, *Family Matters*, *Full House*, *Even Stevens*, *Lizzie McGuire*, *Friends*, *Stranger Things*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Fresh Off the Boat*. (Many of these shows can be found on YouTube, and most episodes are only 20 to 25 minutes long.) These shows are relatively wholesome, and the content typically involves young people coming of age and dealing with issues at school, with friends, and with family. These experiences ring true for our students. Of

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course, instructors should preview episodes before assigning them to make sure the content is appropriate for the local culture and learning context.

The key difference between literature circles and MCs is that the assignment becomes an interactive auditory and visual experience as opposed to involving extensive reading. It is crucial that the material chosen be a narrative format. The rationale behind choosing a TV series is that the narrative is divided cleanly into episodic events that can be followed on a weekly basis. Furthermore, the dialogue between characters provides realistic representations of the English language and phrases that students can incorporate into their own speech patterns. It has been my experience that students can hardly wait to view the next episode, so it is best—if possible—to make MCs at least a weekly occurrence to minimize the possibility of students jumping ahead into the storyline and then having to revisit stale materials. Alternatively, MCs could be done on a monthly basis by using less-linear video resources so that students need not refrain from jumping ahead in the plot of a storyline that interests them. It is advisable in some cases to have students rewatch episodes in order to increase their exposure to the materials; MCs discussions inspire more-passionate responses when the material is fresh in the students' minds.

Each of the five group members will have a specific purpose to fulfill while viewing the assigned episode and will collect data, based on the assigned roles, to be presented in the group discussion. The episode is to be viewed as homework and then discussed during the following week. The purpose of this is to maximize student talking time (STT) and give students the liberty to watch the material

at whatever pace they need. Students have reported to me that they like to watch the episode once through for comprehension before attempting to fulfill their assigned tasks. Students negotiate and assign roles within their own groups, and their contribution to the group discussion will largely be based upon these assigned roles (Daniels 2002). The purpose of the discussion is not to come to any predetermined conclusions, but to allow students to share their reactions and the information they prepared in their assigned roles. The roles are as follows:

1. *Summarizer*: responsible for giving or eliciting an oral summary of the video
2. *Word master*: responsible for choosing new, important, and/or interesting words and multiword expressions to share, define, and contextualize
3. *Scene selector*: chooses key scenes, explains reasons for the choices, and offers and elicits comments
4. *Connector*: makes connections between real-life people and events with the story content and prepares questions to invite similar comments
5. *Cultural collector*: looks for cultural similarities and differences between the story and the local culture or the culture of the group members, brings them to light, and invites comments through questions to circle members

Keep in mind that when classes cannot be evenly divided into groups, some roles can be combined. Perhaps the most reasonable combination would be the roles of summarizer and scene selector, as they overlap rather well.

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When students view and collect information to share in a discussion, it is important that they note the time stamp of an event in the episode. For example, if the word master chooses the word *crush*, he or she should include the minute and second [21:07] that the word is uttered. If a team member is choosing a larger scene from an episode, a time range may also be appropriate—for example, “the bus ride [16:32–19:09].”

The teacher's role during the group discussions should remain primarily observational. It can be tempting to take control of the class or participate actively in discussions, but that would reduce STT as well as undermine the unique interpretations that students bring to bear. In addition, allowing students to negotiate meaning and conduct their own discussions places MCs in the categories of both task-based learning and the communicative approach. Nevertheless, the teacher should not play *too* passive a role, instead making sure to move about the class to listen for common issues, help with difficulties in pronunciation, and answer questions as needed.

The group discussions may last anywhere from ten to 20 minutes, depending on the comfort level and ability of the students. Teachers might be tempted to scaffold this activity, but experience has shown that scaffolding tends to diminish the autonomy of the students, which is a key aspect of MCs. However, during the first few sessions, my students found it helpful to first meet with members of other groups who performed the same homework task as themselves. By hearing the interpretations of the task by others, students were able to make the adjustments in future sessions. It is best not to let discussions run too long, though, as some students might get off task and lose interest in the activity.

The teacher may choose to extend the activity by holding a whole-class discussion of the episode after the groups finish sharing or by preparing materials to fill gaps in understanding. That is to say, teachers may view the episode and select idiomatic or colloquial language to share with students, point out subtle real-life connections, or explain cultural behaviors that would not likely be salient to students without aid. Teachers would be wise, however, to save such supplementary presentations for the end of the discussions, as doing so will prevent students from feeling that their answers and impressions deviate too much from the teacher's, potentially resulting in feelings of inadequacy.

### EVALUATION

Teachers should keep in mind what the goals of this activity are—and perhaps more importantly what they are not. Some teachers may look for a way to weave this activity into their own curriculum, depending on how much flexibility they have. For example, a unit about families might be supported by assigning an episode or two of *Boy Meets World*, *Full House*, or *Family Matters*. However, this activity is really meant to be supplementary and universal. If the activity becomes too structured, and if the teacher takes too active a role, many of the benefits will be lost. MCs should put students at ease and encourage independence and exploration. Many of my own students reported that they felt their ability to derive meaning from the episodes, as well as their note-taking skills, was greatly enhanced.

As such, there does not necessarily need to be much accountability for the materials from discussions. For example, teachers might consider how to hold their students accountable for vocabulary that was uncovered as a result of MCs. If accountability is a major concern, small quizzes might be given each

week to account for the previous week's task. On the other hand, as this is designed to be a supplementary activity, the addition of quizzes may take away even more precious class time. Likewise, additional homework assignments related to MCs may remove the joy of such an activity in the first place.

## LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations to be mindful of. First of all, selecting appropriate viewing materials can be tricky. Teachers need to use their judgment and aim for materials that will not be overly challenging for comprehension. It is often the case that there is a range of skill levels in a given classroom. By choosing materials that are convoluted or technical, all but the most dedicated students may struggle to comprehend the content, lose interest in the activity, or be unable to contribute meaningfully to discussions. Materials should be on the easier end of the spectrum so that comprehension is not the main issue; instead, higher-order thinking skills, cultural aspects, and idiomatic language should take precedence. I recommend looking for shows that involve children or teenagers, as the language they use will be somewhat universal, and the issues the characters encounter more relatable to the students.

Should students be allowed to use subtitles when they watch the episodes? Are English-only subtitles appropriate? These questions will be for individual teachers to answer based on their own specific class contexts. Not allowing subtitles would make MCs a more listening-focused activity; this would also encourage a more holistic understanding of the episode. On the other hand, the lack of subtitles would make completing the assigned roles more troublesome for some students. Alternatively, the use of subtitles removes the necessity of intense listening but allows for a deeper understanding of vocabulary in real time, allows students to identify and search for unfamiliar words, and reduces feelings of anxiety for lower-level students. It also removes some of the pressure on the teacher to be as exact when choosing the appropriate level of difficulty for the TV series.

Another possible limitation is access to the viewing materials. Teachers and students in certain countries may not have access to various websites, making the activity more difficult for students to complete. In these cases, teachers would do well to acquire the files and distribute them to students by email or by USB drive. In situations where students do not have Internet access, teachers will inevitably be limited in the selection of viewing materials.

## CONCLUSION

MCs support student autonomy and foster meaningful interaction with the target language, both in and out of the classroom. Students collaborate and develop teamwork skills while exploring the language in a highly contextualized environment, which improves motivation, enhances retention, and promotes fluency. The use of MCs in English-language classrooms is desirable not only for its stimulation of language acquisition, but for its compatibility with acceptable ELT practices—not to mention that the activity is highly enjoyable.

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