# Implementing Online Literature Discussions in EFL Classroom

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## Abstract

This article discusses the importance and possibility of integrating the Internet, the Web-log in particular, into EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. A very feasible way for literacy teachers to motivate EFL students to read and write is to initiate online literature discussions by creating a web-log. The literature review demonstrates that using the web-log to conduct online literature discussions can engage EFL students in authentic reading and writing activities and can help them express their thoughts in a collaborative environment. In this article the author shares her experience of using the web-log to involve students in the literature discussion activity. Based on the understandings gained from the author's teaching experiences, in this paper the author particularly provides pedagogical suggestions so that other teachers of EFL students can learn the tips of implementing online literature discussion in their English courses.

**Keywords:** Web-log, EFL (English as a Foreign Language), Online Literature Discussion

# 網路讀書討論會在英文課程中之應用

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## 摘要

　　本文討論了網際網路--特別是部落格——在英語（作為外語）教學上的重要性及實際可行措施。英語教師欲激發學生的英語閱讀和書寫興趣，一個非常可行的方法就是經由「部落格」創建一個在網路上進行文學討論的空間。文獻指出經由這種網路讀書討論會，學習英語的外籍學生將能夠進行真正的閱讀和寫作活動，並可以學習如何在協同互動的環境中表達自己的思想。本文作者在文章中分享了以「部落格」引導學生進行網路讀書討論會的實際教學經驗。根據作者的教學心得，本文中尤其對其他英文老師提供了進行「網路讀書討論會」實際可行的教學建議。

關鍵詞：部落格、英語學習、網路讀書討論會

# 1. Introduction

Educators believe that students learn how to improve their reading and writing skills by actually reading and writing in meaningful situations (Atwell, 1993; Graves, 1983; Smith, 2005).  Therefore, reading authentic texts and writing for real audiences can prove to be a great aid to those who are learning a language.  However, as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher for many years, I have long noticed that too often in English language classrooms "students work alone to practice language skills for future use" (Freeman & Freeman, 1992, p. 102).  As a result, students spend a lot of time doing drill-and-practice exercises instead of engaging themselves to "use" the target language in authentic ways.

To plan effective literacy instruction in EFL classrooms researchers believe it is necessary for teachers to learn as much as possible about the individuals learning English.  It is particularly important to consider information such as each student's English language proficiency, their prior knowledge and life experiences, and each individual's literacy in the primary language (Peregoy & Boyle, 2004, p. 113). Many studies also provide specific guidelines for classroom implementation when teaching English as a foreign language, including the suggestions that language learners should have many opportunities to read and write in meaningful contexts, that the curriculum should build on what students already know and can be connected with students' families and culture, that teachers should introduce multicultural literature and use effective strategies such as cooperative grouping to engage students, and that they should also vary assessment strategies in order to fairly evaluate students' achievements (Northwest Educational Technology Consortium, 2005).  When English teachers apply these strategies to their EFL students, they are able to help their students remove possible negative feelings or emotions, such as anxiety, stress, low self-confidence and lack of motivation (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). These feelings can hinder a student's learning, and therefore by attempting to alleviate them, teachers are able to make learning more meaningful for their students.

Researchers in Taiwan have long recognized that second and foreign language

learners need different instructions than first language learners. They suggest cooperative learning and group discussion activities to provide students with more opportunities to learn from and with peers (Liao & Oescher, 2009; Huang, 2007; Su, 2007). Educators have recognized the growing trend of internet usage for social networking, learning and entertainment, especially amongst Taiwanese youth. Therefore, in order to respond the increasing demand for technology use, Taiwanese educators are beginning to integrate technology into the collaborative classroom practices. In recent studies, teacher-researchers in Taiwan employed computer assisted and Internet-based instructions in order to enhance students' listening comprehension (Chiu, 2007), involve students in multi-language learning (Lin, 2007), improve their writing skills (Cha, 2008), help students with their pronunciation (Tsai, 2008), and engage them in problem-solving tasks (Wu, 2008). Like the other English teachers in Taiwan, I am becoming more aware that I need to adjust my instructions to meet students' special needs; otherwise I will "risk limiting the degree to which some of [my] students will learn" (McKenna & Robinson, 2006, p. 67). As a result, I have explored the integration of the Internet with current literacy instruction, and paid particular attention to one pedagogical implication, online literature discussions, and its practical tool, the web-log.

# 2. Literature Review

## 2.1 The Internet and English Literacy Instructions

Scholars have raised an important question for English teachers to consider: "For those students who use English as a second language, what are the most appropriate teaching techniques and materials?" (Robinson et al. 2004, p. 90) Based on my experiences with EFL students, I came to realize that technology, particularly the internet, intrigues and enhances students' learning to a great extent. A report by Taiwan Network Information Center (2006) about the percentages for different age groups of Internet users in Taiwan indicates that the age group of 16-20 years old has the highest percentages of Internet users, at 98.90% or 1.57 million people. Coming close in second place are the 12-15 year olds, with a percentage of 98.00% or 1.27

million people (p. 3).    These figures suggest that the Internet has become a popular tool in the lives of today's young adults.    It is apparent that our students have never experienced a world without computer-based technologies--they regularly surf the Web, send e-mail, and use instant messaging (Alexander & Fox, 1994, p. 54). Consequently, the recent boom in Internet access, as educators notice, brings revolutionary development in the history of literacy (Purves, 1998, p. 235).

A term of "new literacies" (Karchmer et al., 2005, p. 5) is accordingly created to indicate how literacy today has transacted with the new technology and how this new technology "is within us, imbued with our beliefs and values, and we are within it" (Bruce, 1997, p.22).    Since educators are very much aware that their students' future depends on their ability to effectively use the Internet (Leu, 2000, p. 2), there is no doubt that most literacy educators are becoming increasingly interested in new technology and it is quickly becoming an indispensable part of their instructions.

Among the computer-based technologies integrated into literacy instructions, online communications are receiving increasing attention.    Of the various online communications, including electronic mail, listservs, electronic bulletin boards, chats, and videoconferencing, etc., I believe that asynchronous discussion forums significantly benefit students learning English.    Asynchronous discussion forums not only create new opportunities for writing and collaborating, but also provide an alternative way of learning, in which a supportive community is built and every participant is given opportunities to express ideas and thoughts.

## 2.2 Online Literature Discussions

A very feasible classroom implementation of online asynchronous discussion forums in English literacy instruction is an online literature circle.    According to Schlick Noe (2004), in literature discussion activities, small groups of students "gather together to discuss a piece of literature in depth."    The literary work is of the group of students' own preference.    And the discussion is "guided by students' response to what they have read."     In an online literature discussion group, similarly, all students read the same literature selection and share its meaning cooperatively, but through online postings instead.    Such an online literature discussion benefits English learning students in many respects.

To begin, students are given an opportunity to read various contexts in an authentic way.   The purpose of the online literature discussion is to promote discussion about literary works.   So instead of the focus being placed on spelling, pronunciation, or grammatical drills, students are encouraged to reach comprehension of the texts as well as to reach understanding of the world and of themselves. Moreover, with proper reading guidance and careful choice of multicultural literature, students are able to refer to their prior knowledge and thus successfully reconstruct their old knowledge into new one.   Another important benefit of the online forum to consider is the ability for more advanced thought development.   In real-time conversations, restricted by their oral ability, EFL students often feel frustrated when topics move on before they are able to develop their ideas and ways to share them. But "when given a chance to think and then speak, as is the case in several forms of online conversation, these people experience a new freedom and level of participation" (Jonassen et al., 2003, p. 76).   Additionally, to write for real audience, who gives feedback on their own thinking, fosters the students' critical thinking, which in return motivates them to read and write more.   Most important of all, online literature discussions help build a learning community, which provides "a medium for storing, organizing, and reformulating the idea that are contributed by each community member" (Jonassen et al., 2003, p. 72).   This is especially crucial to English nonnative students' learning since the community members' diverse backgrounds and perspectives help them see things in a broader sense and the help from peers make them less uncomfortable.    In conclusion, online literature discussions provide English learning students with authentic reading and writing experiences, in which reading and writing become "the means to exchange information and build knowledge" as well as "a social and collaborative act" (Kasper, 1999).   The result is that English learning students enjoy being involved in reading and writing tasks and hence improve their learning.

## 2.3 The Web-log and Online Literature Discussions

Basically there are two ways to engage students in online literature discussions. One is to encourage students to join existing online book clubs.   Such book clubs as Yahoo Bookworms (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bookworms_Reading_Group/) or

Adbooks (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/adbooks/) offer an email list for discussing literary works.   However, as researchers point out, teachers should be aware that many of the conversations on these free chatting websites may not be suitable for their students (Jonassen et al., 2003, p. 78).   In addition, it may take teachers a lot of time and effort to search for books being discussed that happen to suit students' interests and levels.   Considering this, I believe a better suggestion is for teachers to initiate their own online literature discussion forums.   A very practical online tool that may prove useful in initiating an online literature circle is the web-log (or blog).

The web-log is an online venue, which aims to share personal journals or diaries; but with its communicative trait, the web-log has been received with increasing interests from educators.   The web-log's entries are usually followed by a comment button, which allows readers to write a reaction that, along with other comments, is linked into the original text (Godwin-Jones, 2003, p. 14).   In addition, all of the messages are maintained in a threaded, hierarchical structure. Consequently, the web-log is easy to combine with literature discussions since it is easy to publish, to respond, and to track.

Researchers advocate the use of the web-log in literature response activities. They believe that the blog, used as an 'out of school' tool, provides students with a different medium to do a familiar 'in school' activity (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton, & Nierlich, 2008; Williams, 2005; Zawilinski, 2009).   Moreover, when students are involved in posting collaborative blog posts about literary works, the blog may particularly serve to increase students' awareness of effective writing strategies (Zawliniski, 2009), "stimulate debate and motivate students to do close reading of the text" (Richardson, 2003, p. 40), and help create a community where students generate their own responses to the literature and make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections (Franklin-Matkowski, 2007).   In general, the web-log proves to be an applicable tool when literacy teachers involve their students in online literature discussions.

# 3. Implementing Online Literature Discussions in my EFL Classroom

Starting in 2006, I began implementing online literature discussions in my EFL classrooms by inviting students to 'blog' about the literary texts we read together or individually.    I set up particular web-logs on the free web-log website, *Blogger* (http://www.blogger.com).    *Blogger* provides free blog space, with plenty of handy templates and a user-friendly dashboard (see figure 1).

Figure 1

*The Free Web-Log Website*



The students blogged about the literary texts with their peers while I took charge of the blogs as the administrator.    Except for giving some essential 'nudge', such as inviting the students to post more often or providing certain topics for them to ponder about, I usually positioned myself as a silent reader.    The students wrote on a weekly basis their responses to the texts and the connections they made after reading the texts.    They also commented to one another's thoughts and feelings (see figure 2), and they sometimes created their own literary works as a response to the texts (see figure 3).    Very often they uploaded images to highlight their text messages (see figure 4).
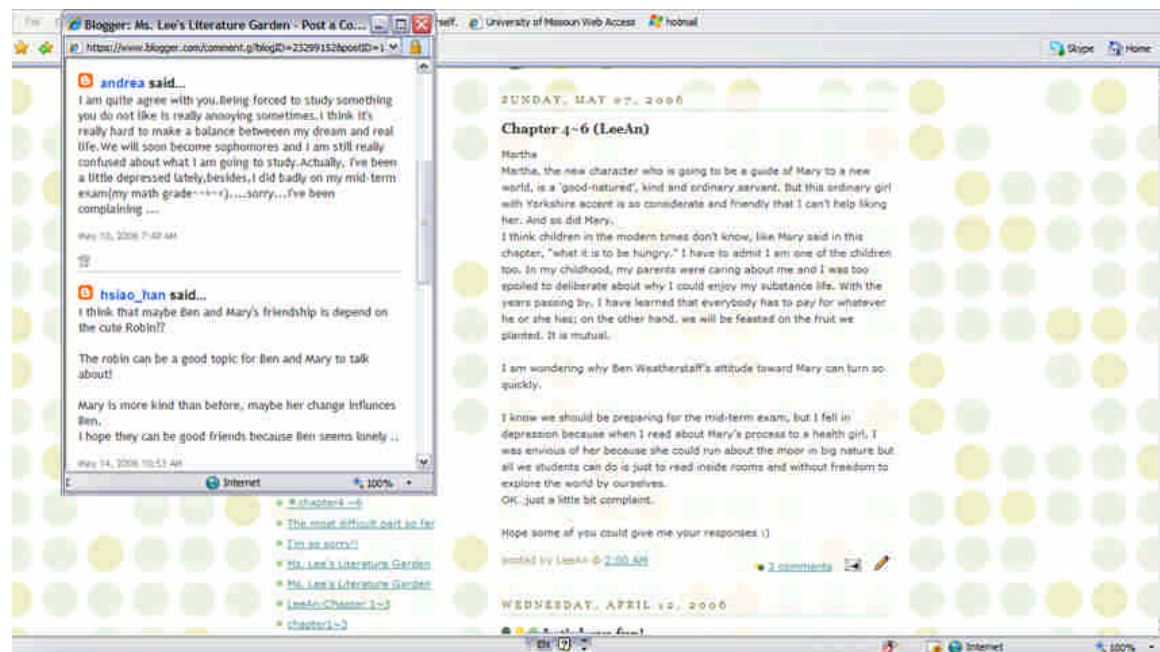
Figure 2

*Students Commenting to One Another*



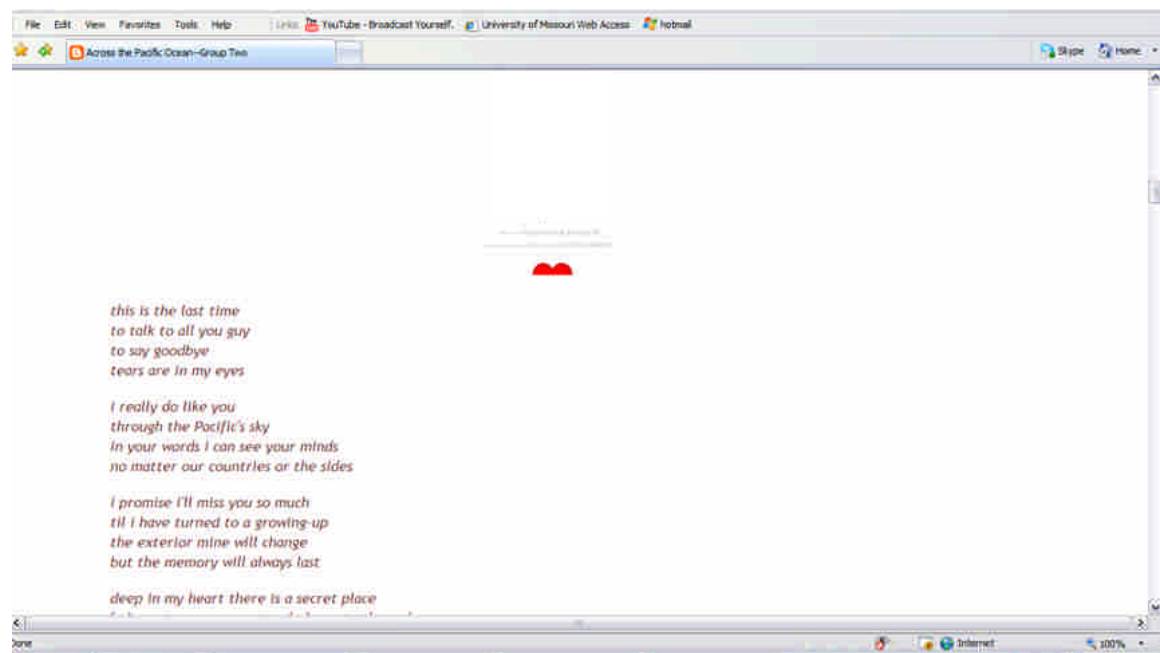Figure 3

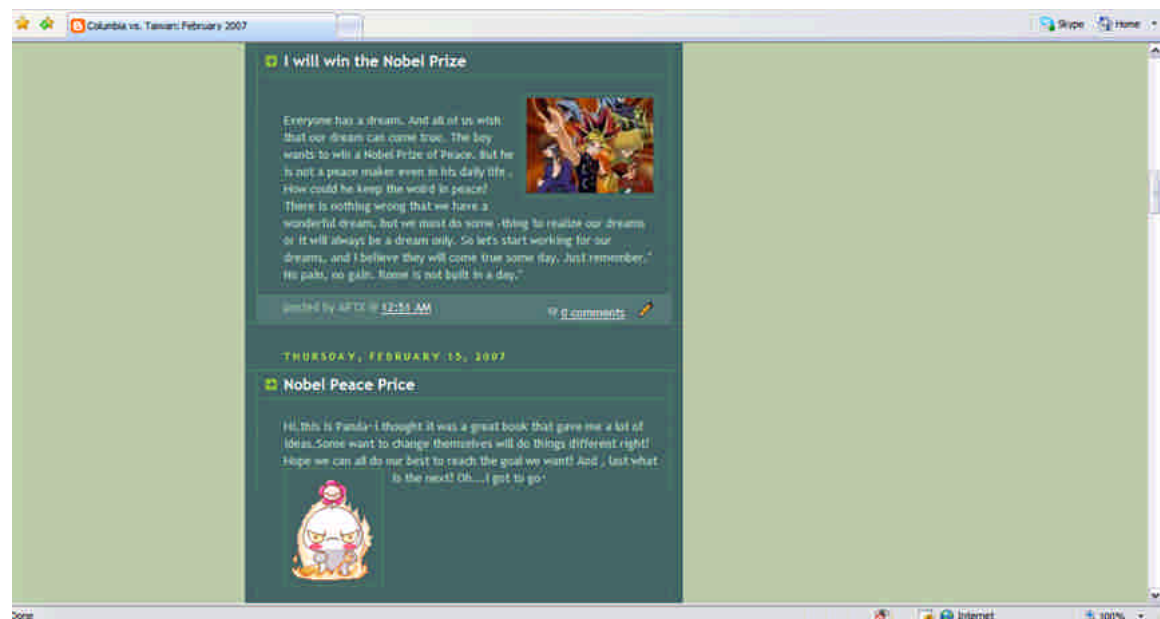*Student Creating a Poem on the Blog*

Figure 4

*Students Uploading Images along with the Blog Entries*



       In their retrospective interviews, most students[1] gave positive comments about this learning activity.    They thought blogging about literature was interesting. The informal writing style of blogging allowed them to write more freely and spontaneously, which accordingly took away the pressure they usually felt when they did academic writing.    Moreover, doing collaborative responses to literary texts provided them with the chances to appreciate other students' thoughts and therefore helped expand their thinking and understandings about the texts.    They also enjoyed having the blog as a platform for them to publish their ideas and sometimes even share their creative writing pieces.    Overall, the students benefited from the online literature discussion activity, since they are motivated to learn English and to be actively engaged in reading and writing about literary texts.    The only setbacks the students pointed out when participating in this learning activity were that they did not always have time to get online and that they tended to forget to post before the deadline for the weekly assignment.    Therefore, self-regulation is a significant factor for the blogging activity to run well.    Students must manage time well and have to have enough self-discipline to stay on task.

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[1]  Among all of the students recruited for the online literature discussion projects, none claimed that they disliked the blogging activity.    However, a small number of students (around 15%) dropped out midway due to various reasons.    Therefore, their comments on the activity were not available.

# 4. Suggestions for Classroom Implementation

My experiences with using the web-log to involve students in online literature discussions have been successful and I have gained insightful understandings from the various online literature discussion activities I conducted. Based on these understandings, I made the following pedagogical suggestions.   I encourage other English teachers who are interested in employing the web-log to involve their students in online literature discussion activity to follow these tips:

## 4.1 Solve the Practical Technique Problems First

Although computer-based technology is prevalent today in our society, teachers should be aware that digital divide still exists and a certain number of EFL students "lack basic knowledge such as how to operate a mouse or open a folder" (Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997).   Therefore, before initiating online literature discussions, teachers must "incorporate all needed adaptations available for [students] with disabilities" (Gorski, 2001).   They also " must be willing to spend a fair amount of in-class and out of class time helping students acquire the basic computer skills that will make the Internet a fun and rewarding part of their language education experience" (Fox, 1998).   Such basic skills as keyboarding, word processing, and online surfing will be essential to students engaging in online literacy discussions. In addition, teachers need to schedule the computer lab and classroom computer hours to ensure students are able to access to the computer and the Internet within the class period.   If teachers wish to start cross-class or even cross-country online literature discussions, they may either subscribe to teaching-related listservs (e.g. listserv@listserv.syr.edu), sign up for teachers' forum (e.g. Dave's ESL Café: http://www.eslcafe.com/forums/teacher/viewforum.php?f=20), or join classroom exchange programs (e.g. e-PALS.com: http://www.epals.com/) to find the match for their class.   However, teachers need to keep in mind that looking for a perfect match for their class may take time and effort.

## 4.2 Involve Students in Decisions

Teachers should not underestimate English learning students' capability in

deciding what they want to learn and how they are going to learn it.    Researchers make it clear that "in order for students to learn meaningfully, they must be willfully engaged in a meaningful task" (Jonassen et al., 2003, p. 20).    When teachers allow students to assume the authority that they possessed earlier and hence successfully transform students from passive knowledge receivers to active knowledge constructors, they motive students in their meaningful learning activities.    For beginning English readers and writers, teachers' scaffolding is essential.    Therefore, teacher-recommended reading texts and writing prompts should be provided during the early stage. However, once students become more engaged and experienced, self-selected texts and writing topics will allow students to accomplish more. Accordingly, in online literature discussions, teachers should involve students in such decision making as what book to read, what their reading schedule is, how often they should post and comment, and what post-reading task they would like to accomplish. The teachers' role is to provide information, examples, and suggestions for students to refer to before the decision making. In doing so, teachers become "a guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage" (Warschauer & Whittaker, 1997), and students are able to claim the agency of their learning.

## 4.3 Engage Students in Meaningful Reading

Like any reading class, in running online literature discussions teachers need to prepare students before they start reading.    For younger students, guided reading may serve a good start.    After evaluating students' English reading levels and investigating their general interests, teachers can make book choices and read the texts together with their students.    During the reading process, teachers may demonstrate the use of various comprehension strategies and even provide translation help.    As students become more experienced readers, they should be encouraged to choose books of their own interests.    An online book talk is then helpful when students are trying to choose which book to read.    Teachers may post a suggested reading list with hyperlinks to book reviews and authors' websites for students to consult.    Once students begin reading, teachers may suggest some easy prompts, such as "I thought...," "I liked....," "I wondered...," and "I felt...," (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999) for students to begin contemplating future conversation topics.    Teachers may also

suggest such strategies as post-it notes, bookmarks, golden lines, and interesting words, etc. for students to generate ideas and thoughts when they are reading.    (For more detailed information, go to Literature Circle Resource Center website: http://www.litdiscussions.org/Discussion/prep.html#Prompts.)    With all the help and guidance, students will read with interest and intention.    And they will be ready for the next step, discussion.

## 4.4 Encourage Students to Participate

One unique characteristic of online collaborative project is that it encourages every participant to contribute.    However, teachers should not ignore the fact that EFL students may be conscious of their English performance, therefore feeling timid to blog.    In consideration of this, teachers need to assure students that they are not posting to please the teachers or their peers, nor will their teachers grade on what they post.    If students post to impress, they may either focus greatly on the contents that they assume people would love to read or make too much effort to write as correctly or even "perfectly" as possible.    Consequently, they may stop posting when they become stuck on trying to figure out how to say something.    A friend of mine, who is an experienced classroom teacher, even suggested that teachers can set an example by posting in more informal languages.    Therefore, if the teachers' goals are not so focused on training students in writing properly, but instead more on facilitating rich and meaningful discussions among a group of students, they should encourage students to express themselves in a more colloquial way.    Teachers should also keep their students' English proficiency in mind.    Blogging about literature will be a beneficial alternative approach when involving older or more advanced English language learners in learning English.    However, if a written text is the only format allowed on the blog, it will undoubtedly intimidate younger (such as K-12) or less proficient English learners.    Therefore, in order to encourage students to fully participate in the blogging discussion activity, multi-modal means of expressing thoughts should be stressed.    Students can upload images, audio files, and even video files to supplement what they write about the reading texts.    When doing so, younger or less proficient learners can always find a way to share with others their opinions, and therefore are granted the same opportunity to participate in the learning activity.

## 4.5 Plan for Extension Projects

Researchers maintain that literature discussions "offer students the opportunity to extend and develop interpretation through artistic forms of response.   Ending a literature circle unit with an extension project provides readers additional ways to revisit what they've read, continue the conversations (and the discoveries), and create even more meaning" (Schlick Noe, 2004).   Therefore, teachers need not to confine online literature discussions to book discussions only.   Instead, teachers should promote various extension activities for students to get involved in.   Many collaborative post-reading projects have proved to be successful in integrating what students have learned and in intriguing them to learn more.   McGowan's "Read a Winter Book…Write a Winter Poem (2004)" project (http://www.mrsmcgowan.com/winter2004/index.html) is a very good example of encouraging students to try poetry writing after the reading discussions.   Kerul's "Book Reviews by Kids for Kids" project (http://marykreul.teacherhosting.com/blog/archives/cat_book_reviews.php) is another good example in inviting students to incorporate what they have learned from their reading and turn it into thoughtful words.   Teachers can also encourage students to keep a reading journal by creating their own web-logs.   With the publication of their written works, EFL students learn to share their thoughts with others and feel confident about their English and themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

Many applications of collaborative learning prove to be helpful for students, and even statistics show that students who participated in collaborative learning performed significantly better on the critical- thinking test than students who studied individually (Gokhale, 1995).   Furthermore, when collaborative tasks are to be completed in an online environment, educators find that EFL students are able to "create, share, apply, and critique their own new knowledge, rather than just absorb knowledge created by others" (Kasper, 1999).   Therefore, with the consideration of English learning students' particular needs in mind, English teachers can no longer excuse themselves from this Internet-based instruction of their professional role (McGowan, 2005, p.

100).    They need to find ways to integrate online communications into their curriculum.    Among them, online literature discussions, the combination of literature discussions and the newly trended web-blogging, promise to be a significantly effective way.    Using the blog to conduct online literature discussions not only provides EFL students with authentic reading and writing experiences, it also allows the students to learn at their own pace and their own level.    It particularly eases the stress that EFL students may experience since the students are 'blogging' instead of doing some formal writing activities.    The sense of learning within a knowledge-constructing community and writing for real audience help build students' confidence as well.    However, since not too many studies related to the application of web-log into literature discussions have been conducted, there is a need for further research.    Educators have to carry out more classroom implementation before they make any valuable evaluation.    English teachers will be happy to see that online literature discussions are able to offer a positive way for their students to learn and to become life-long independent learners.

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