

## FOSTERING THE LOVE OF READING: DYNAMICS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF BOOK CLUBS IN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITIES

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**Received:** 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023/**Revised:** 29<sup>th</sup> May 2023/**Accepted:** 06<sup>th</sup> June 2023

**How to Cite:** Rifai, I., Ermerawati, A. B., Rusiana., Paradita, L. I., Anandari, C. L & Pattiwael, A. S. (2023). Fostering the love of reading: Dynamics and sustainability of book clubs in Indonesian universities. *Lingua Cultura*, 17(1), 85-91. <https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v17i1.9735>

### ABSTRACT

*The research aimed to reveal the dynamics of the book clubs that the researchers started with and for Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students at the university level, as well as the club's impacts on students' learning. Book clubs were essential in nurturing students' reading habits as a community. Studies found that book club activities affected one's engagement in reading by giving readers the voice, room to participate actively, social support, and the choice to decide what they read. Indonesian university students in the EFL context faced reading engagement issues; the researchers initiated book clubs with the unified mission of growing students' love of reading and forming good reading habits. The research reported a qualitative study of a group of Indonesia Extensive Reading Association (IERA) members sharing reflections on establishing and managing book clubs or literature circles in six universities in Indonesia where the researchers taught. The data of participants' reflections were gathered and analyzed iteratively to find common themes or patterns. As a result, the research finds that the book club activities have fostered the love of reading and inferred the empowerment of collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. The research also reveals that in setting up a book club at the university level, the support of the university and the readers' community and extended networks are needed. For a book club to sustain itself, four aspects must be considered: participants' involvement, product-oriented activities, voluntarism of participants, and rewards.*

**Keywords:** sustainable book club, Indonesian universities, extensive reading, reading habit, literature circle

### INTRODUCTION

Studies found that students who have pleasure reading habits are more likely to succeed academically

at school (Boyask et al., 2022) in their second language learning (Artieda, 2017; Mackey, 2020; Milliner, 2019; Ng, Renandya, & Chong, 2019), and even in life (Anandari & Iswandari, 2019). Unfortunately, reading

has not been a widespread habit among Indonesians. Central Connecticut State University (Miller & McKenna, 2016) has reported that Indonesian literacy (reading and writing) behaviors ranked 60th of 61 participating countries. This finding somewhat correlates with OECD's (2019) report, revealing that Indonesian students aged 9–14 could not understand the texts they read.

At the university level, it is reported that Indonesian university students are primarily reluctant readers who need more motivation to read (Wijayanti, 2020). Moreover, despite having a positive perspective about reading as a habit, most students are not keen on reading English books for pleasure. Instead, the university's assignments appear to be the students' most significant motive in reading (Iftanti, 2012).

Creating a healthy reading habit requires multiple parties' involvement and commitment. Students would need readers' role models from parents, teachers, and community members who can orient and guide them in selecting what books to read and how to enjoy reading. Factors such as age distribution, social class, and parents' occupation (Wirth et al., 2020), access to the internet and technology, environmental and parental influences, as well as peer pressure, school curriculum, and teachers (Karchmer-Klein, Boulden, & McDonald, 2022; Le et al., 2019; Loh & Sun, 2019), are contributors to the development of a nation's reading habits. To evoke interest and improve fluency in reading, students also need to read books that are comprehensible and interesting to them.

Day and Bramford, as cited by Wiraningsih and Santosa (2020) and Januarti (2018), have argued that Extensive Reading (ER) allows students to enjoy the reading experience while improving their reading proficiency as they read comprehensible books in various genres. Unlike conventional reading classes, where students must do tests to demonstrate their comprehension when doing ER, students can choose their books and read them as a pleasure or recreational activity. In their extensive research, Anandari and Iswandari (2019) have found that implementing ER in Indonesian schools is a success story. Does the same implementation story apply at the Indonesian university level?

One approach often practiced at schools that could enhance groups' reading habits at the university level is literature circles. In literature circles, students get together to discuss books or literary works. The discussion is generally guided by students' responses to what they have read or when they make personal connections with the books. In a more popular term, a group of people who agree to meet at a particular time to discuss a book is often called a "book club", whose activities are synonymous with literature circles (Thomas & Kim, 2019). Research uses "book club" and "literature circles" interchangeably to address the book-related activities carried out with university students. In the clubs, English books are picked to read, and the English language is used as a primary medium to conduct the discussion.

Reading for pleasure is "a silent and individual activity" (Artieda, 2017). However, it can become a pipeline toward "busy, knowledge co-construction events" where readers are involved in a rich collaborative discussion in literature circles or book clubs. When used as an approach in their writing class, book club helps improve students' writing skills (Attiyat, 2019). Thomas and Kim (2019) have suggested that literature circles not only improve students' reading comprehension and engagement but could also provide an opportunity for collaboration and social interaction. Thus, literature circles would be a practical addition to a postsecondary developmental reading curriculum or even at the college level. It allows students to think critically and reflect as they read, discuss, and respond to books. Collaboration and discussions are at the heart of this approach as students reshape and add to their understanding when co-constructing meaning with other readers.

McCaughey (2017) has established a book club for international university community members to improve their conversation skills. The result is far beyond the expectation that they feel a sense of community and read more extensively, not limited to the chosen book. Álvarez-Álvarez (2016) has revealed that book clubs develop a taste for reading, improves discussion on story-based personal experiences, and provides academic skill learning. The book club is also seen as dialogic reading (McCaughey, 2017), while for Fajardo, as cited by Brown (2019), the book club is a recreational reading whose goal is to foster community.

Lassonde, Stearns, and Dengler (2005) have found different results. The employment of a book club for teacher candidates shows that the participants enjoy the discussion part. However, some are resistant and feel that they are asked to enjoy reading. Similarly, Sylvan (2018) has stated that many students benefit from the book club, while others feel the required discussion elements are less valuable. Therefore, the research recommends altering the book club format regarding frequency, duration, and location.

Despite many studies on book clubs in other contexts, there has yet to be any preliminary study on how they are set up and run or how they have affected Indonesian students' engagement and attitude toward reading, especially in Indonesian universities. Some IERA (Indonesia Extensive Reading Association) members agree to conduct a reflective study based on their experiences setting up and running an English book club at their universities to fill the gap. IERA is an affiliation of the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF), whose primary concerns are helping educators and practitioners find ways to help their students be literate. Based at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, IERA accommodates workshops that provide insights, ideas, and ways to increase literacy awareness in schools and help policymakers in the schools to understand the importance of establishing libraries along with reading programs (Le et al., 2019).

The research aims to answer the following

questions: First, what are the benefits of book clubs for Indonesian university students, especially those learning English at the university level? Second, what are the challenges and lessons learned in starting and running (English) book clubs in the context of Indonesian universities? An optimistic outlook is maintained that the synthesis of the group reflection could become a model for other Indonesian universities in starting and running a book club or doing a literature circle activity.

## METHODS

It is a qualitative research of six IERA members' critical reflection on how they do book clubs in their universities. They are all faculty members of six Indonesian universities from five private universities and one public university based in different parts of Java, Sumatra, and the Bali islands. They usually meet for a project or scheduled IERA meetings. The research follows the protocol of critical reflection "as a way of learning from and reworking experience" (Fook, 2022), by which reflections or data are qualitatively shared (Figure 1).

The data collection begins as IERA members share their experiences through four iterative reflection cycles. The first cycle begins with members sharing their background information, such as the contexts and historical development of the book club. This cycle encourages the members to reflect on their journey in starting and setting up a community of readers. IERA members reflect on their ways of managing and conducting book discussions or book club activities and the challenges they have to endure. The participants also reflect on their successes and failures in setting up and running the book clubs in their contexts.

In the next cycle, two researchers gather and document the participants' reflections on a shared online document. In gathering the reflective notes, open-ended questions on the dynamics of setting up and maintaining a book club are asked.

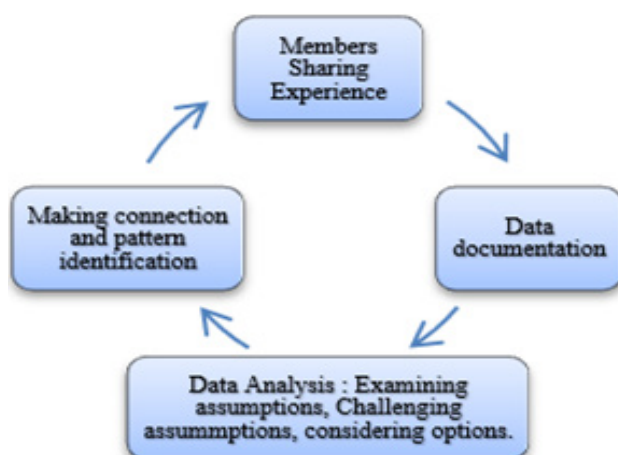


Figure 1 Fook's Cycle of Reflective Data Collection and Analysis

The third cycle of the research is the initial stage of data analysis. Participants' responses are identified, examined, and challenged at this stage. Within this reflective cycle, researchers also identify possible options as alternatives to the assumptions made by the participants.

The researchers are all aware that critical reflection involves repeated cycles of reflection and action (iterative) instead of being a linear or one-time activity. The iterative nature of the data analysis makes it possible for the researchers to go back and forth between the reflective notes and documents of data examination when working on finding emerging patterns.

The last cycle of the data collection and analysis includes when the researchers synthesize ideas and responses from the participants to create connections among responses. In this final cycle, thematic analysis is integrated with the process. The researchers work on identifying and analyzing themes or patterns emerging from the written responses produced by the participants. The researchers systematically categorize and organize the data in this last cycle to extract emerging themes or concepts.

When analyzing and synthesizing the reflection from each member, the researchers integrate the concept and component of historical-cultural activity theory, as shown in Figure 2 (Engeström & Sannino, 2021). The sociocultural activity theory understands a strong relationship between individual learning and the social situation where the learning occurs. Through the perspective of this theory, the book clubs developed and maintained are viewed as interactive, purposeful, and transformational activities performed by members of the book clubs and community members as subjects bound to achieve shared outcomes or purposes. Books and the English language are considered the supporting tools - components integral to the activity theory.

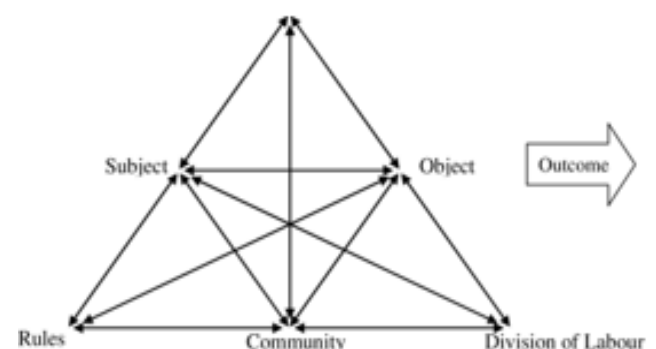


Figure 2 The Activities of Book Clubs Viewed from the Perspectives of Activity Theory

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the reflective notes of the IERA members on their book club experiences. Synthesis is made on some points integral to establishing and managing the book club in the

context of (participating) Indonesian universities. The reflective study manages to answer the questions on the benefits of book clubs for Indonesian university students, especially for those learning English at the university level, and the challenges and lessons learned in starting and running (English) book clubs in the context of Indonesian universities.

On the first question, the research has found that the activities of the book clubs, such as discussion or readers' theaters, positively impact students' monitoring strategy, in which they manage to improve their understanding of the story. Additionally, their speaking skills significantly improve, resulting in more natural communication. Moreover, the book clubs significantly develop students' 4C skills: Critical Thinking, Communication, Creativity, and Collaboration.

On the second question, the research has found that creating a readership community has become vital in ensuring the book clubs' long-term viability. To foster active participation, these universities establish guidelines for members to adhere to and assign specific responsibilities to individuals within the community. By defining roles and distributing them among members, these universities effectively engage their club participants, emphasizing the significance of these actions in member involvement.

The six universities leverage their social connections, including faculty members, university leaders, strategic partners from other institutions, and even students, to establish a strong foundation and support system for the community of readers. The following paragraphs detail the elaboration of the results that focus on how setting up and running the book clubs has affected students, faculty members, and the universities.

They are starting up a book club at Indonesian Universities. To start a book club, one must consider the most fundamental community-building component, i.e., the people. To make a community work, people should voluntarily join the community. It should be based on voluntary and strong internal motives to be part of one. In a nutshell, a community can only become a community when people come together and want to be part of the community (Enciso & Edmiston, 2020; Enciso, 1996; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2023).

To establish a community of readers, Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW), a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, depends upon two previously established clubs, i.e., Virtual Book Club (VBC) and Virtual Readers Theater (VRT) members. One hundred eighty readers are holding the event as the organizers, group leaders, and event supporters. Another private university based in Jakarta, Bina Nusantara University (Binus), relies on its students and faculty members when setting up a community called Virtual Book and Movie Club (VBMC), whose members are 150-200 high school students from all over Indonesia.

Like Binus, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung (UNISSULA), a university located in central Java,

also relies on first-year students who become the faculty members' allies in setting up the community and running the club. Some activities performed, free reading, sharing sessions in small and large groups, discussing opinions, and drawing pictures in response to the books, are used to engage the members.

Universitas Kristen Krida Wacana (Ukrida) starts their "Reading Club" from their literacy sessions in the Vocabulary and Pronunciation Practice course, with extensive reading as the primary approach. The faculty members are responsible for the club reaching out to students in senior high school to bring this Reading Club to schools. In 2019, they collaborated with high school students in Jakarta to do a 5-month-pilot project.

In Bali, through the initiative of one IERA member, Made Hery Santosa, a book club is established as a part of a learning community he formally established in 2015. This learning community focuses on education, literacy, and character building. After visiting many schools, orphanages, communities, villages, and government-based projects around Bali Island, the learning community focuses on helping one school with literacy projects.

A book club can also be formed by involving students taking the institutionalized extensive reading course, like the experience of the Muria Kudus University of Central Java. In this university, the book club members are all students of an extensive reading course that comprises 97 students. The members are senior students who act as tutors for their juniors. The tutors are experienced with the program since they joined the extensive reading course in their first year.

The Sanata Dharma University has found that the support system plays a significant role in helping the faculty members and students start and maintain the community they call the IERA USD Virtual Book Club (VBC). The university leaders do not only offer moral support but also provide the video conference tool to conduct the virtual meetings for 300 participating students. A particular organizational structure is also created to ensure the community has its backbone and operational skeletons. For example, one person in charge of one VBC would be responsible for coming up with discussion questions, which will later be discussed with the members, creating a team whose tasks are to design the e-poster, prepare the applications needed (e.g., pallet, spinning wheel), and create the scheduling (from preparation until the actual VBC). With the distribution of roles or the division of labor, the activities of reading and sharing books within the community have been running smoothly.

Establishing a community of readers is a critical step to ensuring the sustainability of this program. The six universities use their social capital, such as faculty members, university leaders, strategic partners from other universities, or even students, as the backbone and the support system for the community. To engage their members, the six universities set some ground rules for the members to follow and assign specific roles for the members to take. Setting up and assigning

roles to the members are two essential steps to engage club members.

All six universities make the book management of book club management a priority. As most activities during the pandemic are conducted virtually, the books are mostly accessible online. For example, in Bali, the team of Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha prepares a selection of books stored in a digital library from which the participants could choose. Other universities, such as UKDW and Sanata Dharma, provide selected books in their initial Virtual Book Club before having the participants choose their books for the subsequent activity. Accommodating different choices of type of text, genre, and length of the book is important as a good selection of various books encourages participants to read. For this reason, most universities provide the opportunity for their students to select books based on their preferences, which happens to be in line with one of the principles of Extensive Reading, i.e., students choose what they want to read (Day & Bamford as cited by Jacobs & Renandya, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2019; Robb, 2020).

In addition to book management, the universities train the facilitators or mentors who function as group leaders in the book clubs' activities. In the case of UKRIDA, students involved as reading buddies have regular workshops to equip them with the knowledge and skills on literacy, reading activities, and facilitating skills. In BINUS' VBMC program, university students who act as facilitators are trained to facilitate discussion before the event. As a result, most facilitators taking part as volunteers are skillful in leading the discussion with the members, who are all high school students. In their VBC, UKDW and Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana (UKSW) collaboratively hold the VBC together and do a Reader's Theatre as the program's final project. This workshop is critical to inform the students what it looks like and what procedure they could follow to create their performances. Both universities also provide documents such as a project scoring rubric and description to ensure a more well-run performance. This document is helpful to ensure that the activity can be well run, thus creating a positive perception of the book club itself.

The participants share at least four aspects of conducting and maintaining the book club. The first is the participants' involvement in managing the activities. Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha works with the high school student organization (OSIS) to manage the book clubs in Bali. Meanwhile, In UNISSULA, the lecturers who manage the book club involve the students in creating the schedule so that the book club time will meet everyone's time. Participants' involvement also refers to their selection of books.

The second aspect is creating tangible outcomes such as producing podcasts, publishing a book (UPG Bali), and performing a reader's theatre (UKDW). These activities keep the students engaged as they create something out of the books they have read. They can respond and give opinions through podcasts. They can share their reading experience and what lessons

they get and inspire others through writing a book. They can also express and appreciate the story they read through readers' theatre. Using these activities, students also exercise their creativity, critical thinking, and skill of communication.

The third aspect is volunteerism in the book club and active involvement in the post-reading activities or projects. In Bali, one of the reading projects is producing a podcast where students talk about the books they have read. This activity is not made obligatory. Rather, it invites students who would like to join (volunteering). Volunteering highlighted in this sample encourages those eager to improve their capacities and lessen the feeling of being instructed. It may offer the experience of reading pleasurable without requiring completing a task. Lasonde, Stearns, and Dengler (2005) and Sylvan (2018) have found that some students feel they are required to enjoy reading, and the activities are not valuable.

Another example of voluntarism is from Binus and Ukrida, who invite students to be the reading club's facilitators and reading buddies. Volunteerism, however, may need initiation where students are required to join the book club. The requirement establishes and introduces the book club to the students. This strategy is done by Muria Kudus and Binus, who require first-year students to join book clubs.

The fourth aspect is rewarding the students for actively participating in the book club or accomplishing a project. A simple certificate of joining the book club, books, and souvenirs can be a few options to motivate the students to join and be active in the activities. This kind of reward is also practiced by Muria Kudus, where students are given books and souvenirs with the extensive reading logo as awards for active students in the book club. A discussion session is the core activity of a book club. Thus, it is imperative to ensure that the discussion allows students to express and respond to their classmates' opinions. The following are the experiences of some universities in running discussion sessions in their book clubs.

The Sanata Dharma and UKDW prepare the discussion leaders or PIC before running the discussion to ensure a good discussion. The activities are also collaborative, involving students from the two universities and students from another university, UKSW. Bahasa Indonesia is allowed in the discussion sessions. Discussion becomes one of the supporting tools so that everybody can express how they feel and think about reading the novel chapters. Another variation to the activity involves Collaborative Readers' Theatre performance, where students of the two universities create readers' theatre performances. The collaboration between Sanata Dharma, UKDW, and UKSW is an excellent example of how a book club could help extend students' and faculty's networks with people who share the same values and interests in reading. This research considers such collaboration an important component in setting up a sustainable book club, as shown in Figure 3.

A discussion is also highlighted in the post-

reading activity in UNISSULA and BINUS' VBMC. The discussion is done each time the students finish reading the books. Students are divided into groups and meet in break-out or separated virtual rooms to discuss. In their small groups, students share their reading and have one person share the main points discussed with the larger group.

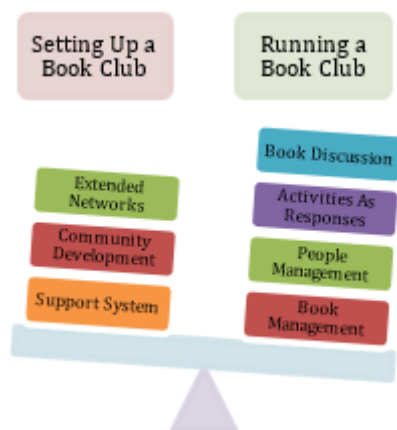


Figure 3 Setting Up and Running an English Book Club at Indonesian Universities

In the UKRIDA's context, the typical activities designed for and by the students are silent reading, small group sharing, post-reading activities (letter writing, poem making, debate, plot/character twist, counselor of the character, detective game, mind reader, and many more), comic strips making, book part rendition, interactive reading sessions. In this university, the discussion is one of the many reading activities introduced.

In Muria Kudus, the discussion sessions of each group are handled by the tutors, and the lecturer team visits and joins the discussion for some minutes in each room. The discussions are scaffolded (Pierce & Gilles, 2021) to cater to everyone's learning and are compelling enough since the students can choose what they read and discuss in a group. Moreover, the detailed activity from pre-, while, and post-reading has been prepared, the tutors are ready with the points of the discussions, and so are the students.

At the heart of the literature circle activity, the research has found that the club discussion sessions encourage them to be more confident in using English to express their opinions in English. In line with Chou (2020), the research has found that the discussions also improve students' monitoring strategy and promote their comprehension. Their speaking ability "sounded more natural than before", and their 4C skills (Critical Thinking, Communication, Creativity, and Collaboration) are also developed.

## CONCLUSIONS

The group reflective study finds two significant findings: first, on the benefits of book clubs on

students' learning and reading habits, and second, on the dynamics of setting up and running a book club at Indonesian universities. It is found that the book clubs' activities have beneficial effects on students' monitoring strategy, which improves their comprehension of the stories they read. Furthermore, the students' speaking skills show fluency and a natural way of communication, portrayed in the development of the students' 4C skills, namely Critical Thinking, Communication, Creativity, and Collaboration. The research also discovers that setting up and running an English book club at Indonesian universities successfully is determined by several aspects: first, the support of the universities and the community of readers; second, the creation of activities that result in tangible outcomes; third, students' volunteerism in the book club and active involvement. Through the delineation and distribution of roles among members, the book clubs successfully engage participants in the book clubs' activities. The fourth aspect, the reward aspect, can come in various forms.

The research on English book clubs in Indonesian universities has limitations as it only focuses on the practices shared by six lecturers from six participating Indonesian universities. Hence, the findings may only partially capture the dynamics and variations present in book clubs across all Indonesian universities. Future studies with a larger scale and a broader range of participants should be conducted to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the state of book clubs in Indonesian universities. Such studies would provide a more representative and comprehensive picture of the dynamics and practices of book clubs in Indonesian university settings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors thank IERA (Indonesia Extensive Reading Association), participating IERA members, and Binus University for supporting this study.

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