
Research Article

Fishbowl Discussion as an Instructional Intervention in Social Studies: Evidence from a Philippine Grade 8 Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The study examined whether fishbowl discussion was associated with changes in Grade 8 students' written assessment performance in Araling Panlipunan, particularly on the topic of European power expansion. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study involved 39 students from a laboratory high school in the northern Philippines with complete paired pretest and posttest scores. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, while qualitative data from interviews with ten purposively selected students were analyzed thematically. Results showed that mean scores increased from 8.82 to 15.44 out of 30, corresponding to a shift in the mean performance classification from poor to good. The pretest-posttest difference was statistically significant, $W = 34.50$, $p < .001$, with a large matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation, $r = .90$. Qualitative findings further revealed that students perceived fishbowl discussion as helpful in deepening understanding, promoting engagement, building confidence, and supporting peer-assisted learning. However, some students also reported challenges, particularly speaking pressure and limited time for individual study. Although the one-group design limits causal claims, the findings suggest that fishbowl discussion can be a useful learner-centered strategy in social studies instruction when supported by clear roles, structured guidelines, and inclusive facilitation.

Keywords: *Araling Panlipunan, Fishbowl discussion, Mixed methods, Social studies education, Written assessment*

Introduction

Social studies education is expected to help learners interpret historical processes, reason with evidence and participate in civic life. These aims are difficult to achieve when classroom participation is limited to passive listening or when students encounter

historical topics as lists of names, dates and events. In the Philippine junior high school curriculum, Araling Panlipunan includes world history competencies that require learners to understand people, society, culture, historical change, and interconnections across societies (Department of Education, 2016). Duyve-Steyn

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and van der Wal (2022) similarly frame world history as a field that helps learners examine change, interaction, and global interconnection across regions. The topic of European power expansion is one such area because it requires students to connect exploration, colonialism, mercantilism, religious change, scientific development, and global consequences.

The article focuses on fishbowl discussion as a classroom intervention for teaching European power expansion to Grade 8 learners. Fishbowl discussion is an interactive strategy in which a smaller inner circle discusses a question, issue or text while an outer circle observes, listens and later contributes. Young (2007) presented a related small-group scored discussion format as an alternative to recitation because it expects students to read, talk and learn together. In this article, the strategy is used not only as a speaking activity but also as a structure for listening, observation, peer exchange and reflective preparation for written assessment.

The study is situated in a Philippine laboratory high school context and examines classroom use of fishbowl discussion in Grade 8 social studies. It focuses on three issues: whether written assessment performance changed after the intervention, how students described the learning experience, and what the findings suggest for structured discussion in social studies classrooms. This framing connects the statistical evidence with students' accounts of participation and learning while recognizing that the design cannot attribute observed change solely to the intervention.

The article contributes to social science education in two ways. First, it offers classroom-based evidence from a rural Philippine context, where student-centered pedagogy must be considered alongside local curriculum requirements, limited class time, and learners' confidence in speaking. Second, it connects quantitative changes in written assessment scores with qualitative accounts of participation, apprehension, peer exchange and classroom support. The mixed evidence is useful because the fishbowl literature reports gains in engagement and dialogue (Han & Hamilton, 2023; Tricio et al., 2019; Yung, 2020), while the

present classroom data also show participation pressures that need explicit facilitation.

The guiding questions were: (1) What were the students' written assessment scores before the fishbowl discussion? (2) What were their written assessment scores after the fishbowl discussion? (3) Was there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores? (4) How did students describe the perceived influence of the fishbowl discussion on their learning and assessment preparation?

Literature review and theoretical framing Fishbowl discussion and participatory learning

Fishbowl discussion belongs to a wider family of participatory classroom strategies that use structured talk to promote learning. In a basic format, students in the inner circle discuss a question, text, or problem while others observe patterns of reasoning, evidence use, and participation. Students then rotate roles or add observations. Young (2007) described small-group scored discussion as a way of moving beyond recitation toward a classroom in which students read, talk, and learn together. Tricio et al. (2019) also treated fishbowl as a learner-centered small-group format that can shift attention from teacher delivery to student participation. In this sense, the strategy is not only a speaking activity; it is also an arrangement for listening, observation and reflection.

Recent studies on fishbowl-related formats report benefits for engagement, dialogue, and active learning across settings. Tricio et al. (2019) examined student experiences of seminar and fishbowl formats in dental education and described both as active, learner-centered approaches. Muehlensiepen et al. (2021) used a virtual fishbowl to reintroduce dynamic debate into medical conferences. Han and Hamilton (2023) reported that fishbowl use in online and hybrid college courses supported engagement, peer-to-peer dialogue and co-construction of knowledge. Yung (2020) showed that fishbowl debate could engage exam-oriented students when communicative tasks were connected to public examination questions. These studies are not located in Grade 8 Araling Panlipunan, but they provide credible evidence that fishbowl formats can support structured

participation when the discussion task, roles, and expectations are clear.

At the same time, the cited studies should not be overextended. Most were conducted in higher education, medical or language-learning contexts rather than Philippine junior high school social studies. This means that their relevance is analogical rather than direct: they justify fish-bowl discussion as a participatory structure, but they do not prove its effectiveness for Grade 8 written assessment in Araling Panlipunan. The present study addresses that gap at a classroom level while acknowledging that anxiety, uneven participation and time pressure may limit the strategy when facilitation is weak.

Social studies, historical understanding and classroom talk

Social studies and world history teaching require more than memorization. Students need to examine causes and consequences, relate local and global histories and develop the language needed to explain historical processes. The Philippine Araling Panlipunan curriculum includes world history content for basic education and identifies learning around history, culture, society and civic life as part of the subject's curricular work (Department of Education, 2016). Duyvesteyn and van der Wal (2022) likewise emphasize world history as a means for understanding change, connection and interaction across regions. These curricular and disciplinary expectations support the use of discussion strategies that require learners to explain relationships rather than merely recall isolated facts.

European power expansion is cognitively demanding for junior high school learners because it brings together several concepts: exploration, imperialism, colonialism, mercantilism, religious change, scientific development and global trade. A discussion-based strategy may support learning because students can hear alternative explanations, clarify confusing ideas, and rehearse the language of historical reasoning before answering written assessments. This expectation is consistent with constructivist teaching, which emphasizes prior knowledge, cognitive engagement, feedback

and reflection in the construction of understanding (Baviskar et al., 2009).

Constructivist and social development perspectives

The study is informed by constructivist learning theory and Vygotsky's social development perspective. Constructivist learning theory argues that learners construct knowledge through experience, reflection, and active sense-making. Baviskar et al. (2009) identified essential characteristics of constructivist teaching, including eliciting prior knowledge, creating cognitive dissonance, and applying new knowledge with feedback. Fishbowl discussion is compatible with these principles because students articulate prior ideas, encounter peers' explanations, receive immediate feedback through dialogue, and revise their understanding while preparing for assessment.

Vygotsky's social development perspective foregrounds the social nature of learning and the role of interaction in the development of higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978). Fishbowl discussion operationalizes this idea by making peer interaction part of the learning design. The inner-circle discussion functions as a shared meaning-making space, while the outer-circle observation supports listening and later reflection. From this perspective, improvement in written assessment may result not only from teacher explanation, but also from the social organization of learning through dialogue, observation and peer-supported clarification.

Methodology Research design

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. In this design, quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data that help explain or elaborate the quantitative results (Ivankova et al., 2006). The design was appropriate because the study aimed to measure change in written assessment scores and then examine how students made sense of the fishbowl discussion experience.

The quantitative phase used a one-group pretest-posttest design. The same class took a written assessment before and after the

fishbowl discussion intervention. The qualitative phase used interview data from selected students to explore their impressions of the strategy, perceived effects on understanding and participation, and suggestions for improvement.

Participants and research context

The class roster comprised 40 students, including 19 males and 21 females. However, only 39 students participated in both the pre-test and posttest and therefore had complete paired scores. The paired descriptive and inferential analyses were restricted to these 39 complete cases. One student did not participate because of personal concerns.

For the qualitative phase, ten students were purposively selected for interview. Selection was based on their assessment experience and participation in the fishbowl discussion. The context is important because the intervention was implemented within a regular Grade 8 social studies topic rather than in a laboratory experiment detached from classroom practice.

Intervention

The intervention was a fishbowl discussion used in teaching European power expansion within the Grade 8 world history component of Araling Panlipunan. The topic included exploration, early imperialism and colonialism, causes and consequences of European expansion, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and later colonialism. These content areas are aligned with the world history coverage of the Araling Panlipunan curriculum (Department of Education, 2016). Students engaged with the lesson through a discussion structure in which an inner group discussed the topic while others observed, listened, and prepared to contribute.

The instructional purpose of the fishbowl was to help students articulate historical ideas, listen to alternative explanations, build confidence in speaking, and deepen their understanding before completing the posttest. The design follows the logic of structured discussion in the cited fishbowl literature, where participation, listening and peer dialogue are treated as mechanisms for active learning (Han & Hamilton, 2023; Tricio et al., 2019; Young,

2007). The activity also aimed to create a more participatory classroom environment than lecture-only instruction.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect the quantitative and qualitative data required by the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. A written assessment measured students' understanding of European power expansion before and after the intervention, while an open-ended interview guide gathered their experiences, perceptions, and explanations of how the fishbowl discussion influenced their learning, engagement, participation, and assessment preparation. Using these complementary instruments allowed the qualitative findings to explain and provide context for the quantitative results.

The 30-item written assessment was adopted without modification from the Department of Education Grade 8 Araling Panlipunan self-learning modules, *Kasaysayan ng Daigdig*, to assess students' understanding of European power expansion. To confirm its suitability for the local research context, five experts evaluated its relevance, clarity, and curricular alignment, resulting in an S-CVI/Ave of .94 and I-CVI values ranging from .80 to 1.00. It was also pilot-tested among 30 Grade 8 students who were excluded from the main study, producing a KR-20 coefficient of .86, which indicated good internal consistency. These procedures confirmed the instrument's content validity and reliability for the intended administration. The scores were interpreted as follows: 24.01–30.00, excellent; 18.01–24.00, very good; 12.01–18.00, good; 6.01–12.00, poor; and 0.01–6.00, very poor.

Second, an open-ended interview guide was used to gather student views. The guide asked about first impressions of the strategy, its effect on understanding, influence on engagement and participation, perceived effect on written assessment scores and suggestions for improving the strategy. These questions aligned with the explanatory purpose of the qualitative phase.

Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered during the third quarter when European power expansion was

discussed in class. Students first completed the pretest. The fishbowl discussion intervention was then implemented during approved class sessions. After the intervention, students completed the posttest. Selected students then participated in interviews about their experiences.

Quantitative data were summarized using frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to determine whether the paired pretest and posttest scores differed significantly. The magnitude of the difference was estimated using the matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation, calculated from the positive and negative Wilcoxon rank sums using the formula: $r = (\text{positive rank sum} - \text{negative rank sum}) / (\text{positive rank sum} + \text{negative rank sum})$. Positive values indicated that posttest scores were generally higher than pretest scores. The analysis included 39 complete pairs, and the level of significance was set at .05.

Qualitative responses were examined thematically. Codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected students' first impressions, understanding of European expansion, engagement and participation, perceived assessment effects and suggestions for

improving the intervention. The analysis emphasized patterns that helped explain the quantitative change in scores.

Ethical considerations

The study was conducted after institutional permission was secured from school authorities. Student participation in the qualitative phase was treated as voluntary, and no student names or identifying details are reported in this article. Because the study involved minors in a school setting, the researchers observed confidentiality, privacy, and appropriate school-based safeguards throughout data collection and reporting.

Result

Written assessment scores before the intervention

Before the fishbowl discussion, students' written assessment performance was generally low. Table 1 shows that 28 of the 39 complete cases, or 72%, were classified as poor. Seven students, or 18%, were classified as very poor, while only four students, or 10%, reached the good category. The mean score was 8.82 out of 30, interpreted as poor.

Table 1.

Pretest written assessment scores before fishbowl discussion

Performance level	Frequency	Percentage
Good	4	10
Poor	28	72
Very poor	7	18
Total	39	100
Mean score	8.82	Poor

Written assessment scores after the intervention

After the fishbowl discussion, the distribution shifted upward. Table 2 shows that four students, or 10%, were classified as very good,

while 30 students, or 77%, were classified as good. Five students, or 13%, remained in the poor category. The mean score increased to 15.44 out of 30, interpreted as good.

Table 2.

Posttest written assessment scores after fishbowl discussion

Performance level	Frequency	Percentage
Very good	4	10

Good	30	77
Poor	5	13
Total	39	100
Mean score	15.44	Good

Difference between pretest and posttest scores

The related-samples Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that the students' posttest scores were significantly higher than their pretest scores, $W = 34.50$, $p < .001$. Of the 39 paired observations, 34 showed higher posttest scores, three showed lower posttest scores,

and two showed no change. The positive-rank sum was 668.50, while the negative-rank sum was 34.50. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation was $r = .90$, indicating a large pretest-posttest difference. Therefore, the null hypothesis that the median difference between the paired scores was zero was rejected.

Table 3.

Test of the difference between pretest and posttest scores

Comparison	Statistical test	Positive ranks	Negative ranks	W	p	r_{rb}	Interpretation	Decision
Pretest versus posttest	Wilcoxon signed-rank test	668.50	34.50	34.50	$< .001$	.90	Large	Reject the null hypothesis

Note. Thirty-four students had higher posttest scores, three had lower posttest scores, and two had unchanged scores. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation was calculated as $(668.50 - 34.50) / (668.50 + 34.50) = .90$.

Student views of the fishbowl discussion

The qualitative data generated five themes that help explain how students experienced the intervention: first impressions of fishbowl discussion, understanding of European expansion, engagement and participation, perceived effect on written assessment scores, and suggestions for improvement.

First impressions: curiosity and apprehension

Students' initial reactions ranged from curiosity to anxiety. Some described the strategy as new and interesting because it differed from ordinary recitation or lecture. One student stated:

"I found the fishbowl discussion to be a novel approach. It immediately caught my attention and piqued my interest in the topic at hand."

Other students were initially hesitant because the inner-circle format placed visible attention on participants. One student explained:

"At first, I was hesitant about the fishbowl discussion. It seemed intimidating to have the

spotlight on a few individuals while the rest observed."

These responses show that the strategy was not received uniformly. Its novelty created interest, but its public discussion format also created pressure for some learners.

Understanding: deeper engagement with historical content

Students reported that the fishbowl format helped them move beyond surface familiarity with the topic. The act of listening to peers and later joining the discussion created opportunities to clarify ideas and connect concepts. One student noted:

"By observing the inner circle's discourse and subsequently participating in it, I gained a multi-faceted understanding that transcended mere surface-level comprehension."

The theme suggests that the intervention helped students rehearse explanations of historical processes and compare their understanding with those of peers. This is important in social studies, where concepts such as exploration, imperialism and colonialism require

relational understanding rather than isolated memorization.

Engagement and participation: ownership and peer exchange

Students also described increased involvement. The inner-circle format created a sense of responsibility because students knew they would need to contribute, listen, and build on peer responses. One student said:

"Participating in the fishbowl discussion made me feel more involved and invested in the topic. It was like being at the center of the conversation, which motivated me to contribute more actively."

Another student emphasized the supportive character of the discussion:

"The fishbowl discussions, unlike traditional class discussions where I sometimes hesitate to speak up, created a supportive environment that encouraged me to express my thoughts freely."

The theme suggests that structured discussion can support participation when classroom norms are clear and when students see their peers as learning resources.

Written assessment preparation: confidence with caution

Students connected the discussion to assessment preparation by describing greater confidence and clearer understanding. One student stated:

"Participating in fishbowl discussions significantly enhanced my exam preparation. Engaging in meaningful dialogue with peers allowed me to deepen my understanding of key concepts and identify gaps in my knowledge."

However, not all responses were entirely positive. Some students worried that discussion time could reduce individual study time. This concern is pedagogically important because a discussion strategy should not replace independent consolidation. Instead, it should be integrated with preparation tasks, note-taking and post-discussion reflection.

Suggestions: inclusivity, clearer guidelines and supportive conditions

Students suggested that the strategy would work better if more voices were

included, instructions were clearer, and the classroom climate remained non-judgmental. One student suggested that broader participation would enrich discussion:

"Incorporating more diverse perspectives would enrich the discourse and foster a more inclusive environment."

Another emphasized the need for clear expectations:

"Providing clearer instructions beforehand would alleviate confusion and ensure everyone is on the same page."

These suggestions show that fishbowl discussion is most useful when it is carefully facilitated rather than treated as an informal conversation.

Discussion

From poor to good performance: what the score change suggests

The quantitative results show a clear upward movement in written assessment performance after the fishbowl discussion. The mean score increased from 8.82 to 15.44, corresponding to a change in the mean performance classification from poor to good. Of the 39 paired observations, 34 had higher posttest scores, three had lower posttest scores, and two had unchanged scores. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a statistically significant pretest-posttest difference, with a Wilcoxon statistic of 34.50 and a probability value below .001. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation coefficient was .90, indicating a large pretest-posttest difference. Thus, the observed change was not only statistically significant but also substantial in magnitude within the participating class. This result is consistent with the broader fishbowl literature linking structured discussion with engagement, active learning, and peer-supported understanding (Han & Hamilton, 2023; Tricio et al., 2019; Yung, 2020).

However, the result should be interpreted carefully. The study used a one-group pretest-posttest design without a comparison group. Therefore, the findings cannot prove that fishbowl discussion alone caused the improvement. Other factors, such as exposure to the lesson, review, teacher explanation and test familiarity, may also have contributed. A

cautious interpretation is that fishbowl discussion was a promising component of the instructional sequence and was associated with improved performance in this classroom.

The qualitative findings make the score change more understandable. Students did not simply report that the strategy was enjoyable; they described mechanisms that could support assessment performance: clarification through peer dialogue, increased confidence, deeper engagement with concepts, and identification of gaps in knowledge. These mechanisms align with constructivist teaching because learners used prior knowledge, feedback, and reflection to refine understanding (Baviskar et al., 2009). They also align with Vygotsky's social development perspective because learning was mediated by talk, observation, and collaborative meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978).

Fishbowl discussion as social studies pedagogy

In social studies, discussion is valuable because students must learn to explain, compare and evaluate human actions and social consequences. European power expansion is particularly suited to discussion because it involves multiple actors, motives and effects. When students talk about exploration, imperialism, trade and cultural change, they practice connecting facts to broader historical processes, which is consistent with the Araling Panlipunan curriculum's emphasis on historical, cultural and social understanding (Department of Education, 2016) and with world history's focus on change and interconnection (Duyvesteyn & van der Wal, 2022).

The fishbowl format appears useful because it gives the discussion a visible structure. The inner circle makes reasoning public, while the outer circle encourages listening and observation. This structure reflects Young's (2007) argument that discussion formats can move learners beyond passive recitation. It also parallels findings from Han and Hamilton (2023), Muehlensiepen et al. (2021), Tricio et al. (2019), and Yung (2020), who reported that fishbowl or fishbowl-related formats can support engagement, debate, peer dialogue, and active learning when tasks are well organized. In social studies classrooms, such roles can

turn discussion into a disciplined practice rather than a free conversation dominated by a few voices.

Participation, anxiety and equity

The student accounts also show that participation strategies must be evaluated for equity. Fishbowl discussion can increase engagement, but it can also create speaking pressure. This qualification is important because several cited studies emphasize engagement and dialogue (Han & Hamilton, 2023; Muehlensiepen et al., 2021; Tricio et al., 2019), but the present Grade 8 data show that younger learners may experience the inner circle as intimidating. Students who are shy, less fluent, less prepared or anxious about peer judgment may need preparation time and multiple ways of contributing.

Practical adjustments include giving guide questions in advance, allowing students to bring notes, rotating inner-circle membership, using observation sheets for the outer circle and assigning supportive peer roles. Teachers can also use short fishbowl rounds rather than one long discussion. These adjustments respond directly to students' suggestions for clearer guidelines, inclusivity and a supportive environment.

Balancing discussion with individual study

A notable concern was time management. Some students felt that discussion supported understanding but reduced time for individual study. This tension is important because written assessment performance depends on both social meaning-making and individual consolidation. From a constructivist perspective, discussion should therefore be paired with reflection and application tasks so that learners can reorganize and apply the ideas developed during peer interaction (Baviskar et al., 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Fishbowl discussion should not replace individual preparation; it should precede or accompany it.

For example, after the fishbowl session, students may be asked to write a brief explanation of the causes and effects of European expansion, list concepts they clarified through peer discussion, or answer a formative quiz. These follow-up tasks connect oral participation to written assessment and help students

transform shared discussion into individual academic performance.

Conclusion and Implications

Grade 8 students obtained higher written assessment scores on European power expansion after the fishbowl discussion than before it. The mean score increased from 8.82 to 15.44, corresponding to a change in the mean performance classification from poor to good. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a statistically significant pretest-posttest difference, with a Wilcoxon statistic of 34.50 and a probability value below .001. The matched-pairs rank-biserial correlation coefficient of .90 indicated a large within-group change. Student accounts further suggested that the strategy supported deeper understanding, active participation, confidence, and peer-supported learning.

The findings imply that fishbowl discussion can be a useful social studies strategy when the goal is to make students reason aloud, listen to peers and prepare for written assessment. However, the strategy should be implemented with clear guidelines, role rotation and inclusive facilitation. These implications are consistent with the cited fishbowl studies, which associate structured discussion with engagement and peer dialogue (Han & Hamilton, 2023; Tricio et al., 2019; Young, 2007; Yung, 2020), while the present findings add that younger learners may need stronger scaffolding to manage speaking pressure and time use.

For social studies educators, the study highlights the value of structured discussion in teaching historically complex topics. For researchers, it points to the need for stronger designs that include comparison groups, larger samples, validated instruments, and delayed posttests. Future studies may also examine how fishbowl discussion affects different dimensions of social studies learning, such as historical reasoning, civic argumentation, source interpretation, and written explanation. Such work would extend the existing fishbowl literature beyond higher education, medical, conference and language-learning contexts into Philippine basic education social studies.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the study found a large and statistically significant pretest-posttest difference, the one-group design did not include a comparison group and therefore cannot establish that the fishbowl discussion alone caused the improvement. Other factors, such as lesson exposure, teacher explanations, review activities, maturation, and familiarity with the assessment, may also have contributed to the observed change. Second, the study involved only one Grade 8 class in one school; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other students, schools, or educational settings. Third, although the class roster comprised 40 students, only 39 had complete paired pretest and posttest scores. One student did not participate because of personal concerns and was therefore excluded from the paired quantitative analysis. Fourth, although the written assessment was adopted without modification from official DepEd Grade 8 Araling Panlipunan self-learning modules, no sample-specific reliability coefficient was reported for the present administration. Fifth, the qualitative phase involved only ten students and may not represent the experiences of the entire class. Finally, because the researchers facilitated the intervention and collected the students' responses, the qualitative findings may have been affected by social desirability bias.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Author-identifying details will be added after review if required by the journal.

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AI-assisted tools were used to support language refinement and manuscript organization. The authors remain responsible for the accuracy, integrity, analysis, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

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