

Literature circles from student perspectives: Reading Zadie Smith's The Embassy of Cambodia (2013) in the EFL classroom

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Introduction

The primary aim of my presentation was to report the results of the survey questionnaire I conducted in order to examine students' perceptions of literature circles employed in Japanese EFL classrooms. I first gave an overview of this style of collaborative learning to put this project into context, before moving on to the course description, in which I employed an adapted form of literature circles, followed by analysis and discussion of the survey results.

Literature circles

In its original form, literature circles started in Chicago, the United States in the early 1990s when Harvey Daniels and his colleagues implemented this approach, a student equivalent of adult 'book clubs,' to teaching literature to students in their local primary and secondary schools (Daniels, 2).¹ Shelton-Strong succinctly defines literature circles as 'small peer-led discussion groups, involved in reading the same piece of literature, and who come together on a regular programmed basis to share interpretations of what they have read' (Shelton-Strong, 214).² Within literature circles, each student is given a role sheet with specific instructions: the Discussion Leader prepares several questions to start the discussion and keep the discussion lively; the Summariser gives a three-minute statement that covers the most important events in the chapter(s); the Word Master chooses 5 words important to understand the chapter(s) and explain in simple English; the Culture Collector reports differences and similarities between the culture represented in the book and one's own culture (Daniels, 18).

The popularity and success of this mode of learning expanded to the context of teaching English as a foreign language. In Japan it has been adapted and implemented in university language classrooms ranging from general English course to more specialised courses including English for medical students, or advanced content-based classes, and even critical discussion classes concerning global issues.³

The course and participants

I employed an adapted form of literature circles in two classes that ran from September 2016 to January 2017 at a university in Tokyo where I work part-time. The course title was 'Language and Communication/Intermediate English: Let's Read and Discuss.' It was one of the elective options alongside a set of compulsory classes all first-year undergraduates are required to take. The classes met for 13 weekly sessions respectively for one semester, each session lasting for 105 minutes. Each class had approximately 30 students, none of whom were literature specialists for the duration of the course; one had 25 males and 5 females; the other 26 males and 1 female.

British author Zadie Smith's 2013 novella The Embassy of Cambodia served as the core textbook.⁴ It is the story of a young migrant worker, Fatou, who works as a live-in-housekeeper in suburban London. In the increasingly globalised world the central theme, 'the limits of empathy, and even concern, for others,' (Ward, 46)⁵ seemed ever more relevant. The combination of the novella and the style of student-centred collaborative learning appeared to make an interesting class.

Students were asked to form groups of four or five at the beginning of the semester, and each group was then assigned a section to work on. A typical session involves a group presentation in English whereby students share the findings of their literature circles held outside class time. Assessments were made based on students' performance during the presentation as well as contribution to class discussions; we also had a written examination at the end of the semester in which students were asked to set their own essay question and discuss it.

The survey questionnaire and results

In order to investigate the students' perception of their experience of the course I designed a simple survey questionnaire with a small set of questions. I asked students to spend a few minutes at the end of the semester to fill out an anonymous survey form. All the instructions and questions were written in Japanese, the native language of the majority of the students. Each question asked the respondents to indicate their opinions on a five-point rating scale by giving marks ranging from 1 to 5. The category 1 stands for 'Strongly agree' and 5 'Strongly disagree.' For reasons of time, I showed an abridged version of the original survey form. The survey results from the two separate classes had been merged as shown in the table below. There were four absentees on the day the survey was conducted, making the total number of the respondents 53 (47 males, 6 females) (See Table 1).

Table 1.

| n.=53 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|--|----|----|----|----|---|---|
| 1. Group activities and presentations were useful in understanding the text. | 14 | 27 | 8 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| 2. The Summariser role was especially useful. | 15 | 24 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 3. The Word Master role was especially useful. | 8 | 19 | 11 | 12 | 3 | 0 |
| 4. The Culture Collector role was especially useful. | 17 | 29 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| 5. The Discussion Leader role was especially useful. | 25 | 18 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 6. Giving a presentation in English enhanced my English communication. | 1 | 23 | 19 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| 7. Exchanging opinions in English enhanced my English communication. | 2 | 23 | 18 | 10 | 0 | 0 |

1. Strongly agree 2. Agree 3. Don't know 4. Disagree 5. Strongly disagree 6. No response

I first asked whether group activities and presentations based on literature circles were useful in helping them to understand the text. In contrast to my optimistic anticipation, only just over half of the students responded positively, whereas nearly a quarter showed their disagreement. This might be due to the perceived 'difficulty' of the text itself and was later examined in more detail. After their general perception of the overall experience of the collaborative style of learning, I asked students to rate the individual roles. The Summariser role was appreciated fairly highly. The novella being just under 70 pages long, giving an oral account of the narratively important events would have been redundant if not totally irrelevant. Thus we decided to leave it to the Summariser's discretion as to the way to draw our attention to the key elements in the chapter(s) and their significance. Despite the seemingly enthusiastic atmosphere the Word Masters generated in the classrooms, their rating was not as high as I had anticipated. This seems puzzling, as I must note that they were quite creative in their effort to make vocabulary learning in context enjoyable and meaningful. In contrast, the Culture Collector role was fairly highly regarded. The targets of their inquisitive minds varied, ranging from sociocultural topics: immigration in the UK and Japan; Christianity/Catholicism; society under the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia; Tudor architecture in the streets of London and Tokyo; to more language-oriented matters such as: common words and expressions related to rain. The most highly regarded among the four was the Discussion Leader. While some questions were more locally concerned with possible meaning(s) of particular words and expressions or one of the character's remarks or gestures, others were concerned with the overarching theme(s) and recurrent metaphors and symbolism in the text. Overall, the Discussion Leaders successfully created a supportive environment to tease out diverse responses from their peers.

I also asked whether they found giving a presentation and exchanging opinions in English had enhanced their English communication skills. While nearly half of the students responded positively to the question, many also remained neutral or disagreed with the idea. This was discussed further in relation to the individual comments to an open-question later.

As for the open-ended question, in total 38 students out of 53 (70%) responded to the prompt in one way or another. I translated and quoted some of them for the purpose of illustration and exemplification. With regard to the general perception of the book, the overall sense of uncertainty caused by the author's elliptical

prose style and the apparent lack of narrative closure at the end constituted a major divisive factor. On the one hand, many of the positive respondents expressed their appreciation of the narrative ambiguity and the resulting possibilities for multiple interpretations, embracing the challenge posed by such vagueness and uncertainty. On the other hand, this was precisely the quality to which those with negative responses expressed their aversion. They almost unanimously expressed their frustration in their inability to 'see the point,' or what the author was trying to get across.

I then proceeded to examine students' comments specifically on the application of literature circles. Three students commented positively on the overall efficacy of this style of learning. One supported the use of the target language in class as an effective way to improve their oral communication skills. Another said the collaborative nature of the activities helped to deepen their comprehension of the text. This student also expressed their satisfaction with exercising the skills learnt in other classes including Academic Writing and Discussion Workshop. The other student noted the role played by the group presentation and class-wide discussions in revealing the sheer diversity in opinions and interpretations.

Some of the not-overly enthusiastic comments were also introduced. Some expressed their frustration at being unable to follow what was being presented, let alone participate in the discussions in English. One student noted the sophisticated reading and interpretative skills demanded by the novella, suggesting that the instructor should do more to clarify the reading content to facilitate students' understanding before they could discuss it. This student, however, quickly concedes that, by doing so, they would be missing the whole point. One also acknowledged the loss of momentum once their turn for presentation is over.

Conclusion

These comments seem to confirm that literature circles, to a certain extent, would help stimulate social interactions among students and, as a result, encourage their personal involvement with the text. At the same time, however, it needs to be combined with other methods, especially when it is implemented in a non-streamed class with students of varying degrees of proficiency. For instance, though we secured, time permitting, opportunities for grammatical analysis of some of the complicated sentence constructions, perhaps incorporating it as an on-going, regular feature of each session might work in favour of students with less confidence. Also, in this respect, the additional roles suggested by Furr (2007) to supplement the original literature circles model, namely the Connector and the Passage Person, might benefit students' comprehension of the text. This, in turn, might boost their confidence to communicate.

Apart from the comments and observations presented, we still have scant evidence for connections between student interaction, enhanced personal involvement and development of their English skills. This only emphasises the importance of further empirical, more sophisticated research with theoretical grounds and consistency, including questionnaire design and an analytical framework both qualitative and quantitative.

¹ Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. York, Me.: Stenhouse, 2002.

² Scott J. Shelton-Strong. 'Literature Circles in ELT.' *ELT Journal* 66. 2 (2012): 214-223.

³ Brown, Howard. 'Literature circles for critical thinking in global issues classes.' *The Language Teacher*. 33.10 (2009): 16-17. Furr, Mark. 'Literature Circles for the EFL Classroom.' *Proceedings of the 2003 TESOL Arabia Conference*. Kusanagi, Yuka. 'Reading Circles and Essay Activities for Medical Students.' *Literature and Language Learning in the EFL Classroom*. Eds. Masayuki Teranishi, Yoshifumi Saito, and Katie Wales. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 212-228. Williams, David. 'A new approach to reading/ discussion focused language learning.' *Josai International University Bulletin* (2011): 65-82.

⁴ Smith, Zadie. *The Embassy of Cambodia*. London: Penguin, 2013.

⁵ Ward, Abigail. 'Servitude and Slave Narratives.' *Wasafiri* 31.3 (2016): 42-48.