

Practices and Perceptions of Literature Circles in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of the present article is to report on the outcome of the preliminary survey on students' perceptions of literature circles in English language classes at a Japanese university, where principles of active learning are translated into practice. By so doing, the article presents advantages and challenges of applying such student-centred approach to English language teaching, through exploratory findings and insights gained from the author's experience. First, the general background of the project is given, as it informs the principles behind the author's pedagogical practices in classes. Then, a brief overview of the use of literary texts and literature circles in language classes is provided in order to give a broader context for this report. It is followed by the description of the course taught with this style of collaborative learning. This section also outlines the reasons for selecting the novella used as the coursebook in the class. Finally, analysis and discussion of the results of the survey on students' perceptions are provided, followed by suggestions on how this approach might be employed to promote the intellectual and moral growth of students.

1. Introduction

Active learning has had a growing prominence in Japanese higher education in recent years. A brief glance at a library shelf and pages of online search results would indicate the depth and breadth of publications ranging from theoretical inquiries on its pedagogical implications to more pragmatically minded volumes on instructional strategies. Literature Circles, or its adapted form, would appear to chime in with this climate that encourages students' own critical thinking and promotes social interaction in classes. I would like to begin by briefly explaining how this project came about. It was during the summer 2014, I was searching for materials for a seminar-style English language course, when I came across *The Embassy of Cambodia*, then the latest output by the British author Zadie Smith. Given the slim volume, I managed to finish it within a matter of an hour. I was fascinated by the compactness of the novella. The brevity of the prose style and resulting ambiguity in many parts of the book, as well as the tacit references to various current

issues, all appeared to beckon to be unpacked and explored further. I was intrigued to know how my students would respond to a book like this.

Some may be alarmed by the sheer compactness of the volume. Indeed a colleague has once asked me if it was the only text to be used in class for the entire semester. Earlier that year, I had used *On Beauty* by the same author as the course material for my reading-oriented class. On the one hand, many students expressed their appreciation of the style of writing that, they described, was refreshingly different from the kind of English they had been accustomed to. On the other, though, a significant number of students confessed to me their agony caused by the sheer volume of the prose they had to plough through each week in preparation. I readily concede that each session was devoted to a detailed explanation of the sections covered, which left us very little time, let alone, energy to do anything else. I had also noticed how painfully shy my students generally were to exchange their reactions and thoughts raised by the reading materials, and the sheer volume of the reading did not seem to help.

Despite the prominence active learning has achieved over the past decades, and the government's education policy increasingly emphasising on training students to be individual thinkers with communication skills, not just to survive but to thrive the relentlessly globalised world, as Nagata (2016) rightly points out, it does not seem to come naturally for students to actively participate and contribute in classes. On the contrary, many appear to be more comfortable in, or at least accustomed to, conventional lecture-style classes where you are expected to sit and listen quietly to take notes (p. 6).

In this context, I was convinced that the combination of literature circles and *The Embassy of Cambodia* might be just "fit for purpose." This book seemed challenging enough without being intimidating in terms of its language, leaving us time to practice and work on skills including, but not limited to, close reading and critical thinking. Permeated with themes and images of power and inequality, cultural alienation, religion and faith, human suffering and trauma, to name but a few, the book also seemed to provide students with ample opportunity for discussion.

2. Literature in the EFL classroom

2.1 Literary texts in the EFL classroom

The role of literary texts in the foreign language classroom at university level in Japan has now been well recognised and documented, with a steady stream of publication of journal articles, monographs and collections of scholarly essays. Although there still appears a preference towards the Western canon, discussion on the use of contemporary fiction in the undergraduate EFL classroom seems to constitute a vibrant, if fledgling, field of inquiry (Fukaya (2015), Kamioka (2003), Kusanagi (2015), and Yasuda (2013)).

Widdowson argues that the principal aim of teaching literature as a subject is to develop "the capacity for individual response to language use" (1975, p. 76). Within this context of

teaching literature as a subject (as opposed to a discipline), Widdowson highlights the importance of “the development in the learners of interpretative procedures” over “the transmission of facts and ready-made interpretations” (1975, p. 76). This latter point is also noted and expanded by Collie and Slater (1987) who warn us that “Often the sheer difficulties of detailed comprehension posed by the intricacy or linguistic subtlety of the language turn the teaching of literature into a massive process of explanation by the teacher or even of translation, with the greater proportion of available classroom time devoted to a step by step exegetical exercise led by the teacher (p. 7).”

Within the liberal arts curriculum, actively promoting the development in the learners of awareness and “capacity for individual response to language use” would appear to be particularly significant since, as Widdowson maintains, such interpretative procedures can also be “applied to a range of language uses, both literary and non-literary” which students might “encounter inside and outside the formal learning situation” (1975, p. 84). Last but not least, it must be stressed that selecting texts that would “stimulate students’ desire to read” and “encourage their response” (Collie and Slater, 1987, pp. 8-10) is becoming ever more important. This would seem especially relevant in the contemporary EFL classroom where social interaction and active involvement are positively encouraged.

2.2 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, 2002, p. 2). 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” (2012, p. 214). 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 five 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, 2002, p. 18).

The popularity and success of this mode of learning expanded to the context of teaching English as a foreign language. In Japan, Furr adapted the original model with Japanese university students in mind, by adding two additional roles, the Connector and the Passage Person (2003). Literature Circles, with or without such modification, has been implemented in diverse 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 (Brown (2009), Kusanagi (2015), Williams (2011)).

The principles and practices of literature circles outlined so far would appear to chime in with the characteristics associated with active learning. While pointing out that the term can be used to mean a wide range of instructional strategies aiming at increasing student involvement in classes, Bonwell and Eisen (1991) identify some common qualities attributed to active learning. These are: “Students are involved more than listening; less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students’ skills; students are involved in higher-order thinking; students are engaged in activities; and, greater emphasis is placed on students’ exploration of their own attitudes and values” (p. 2). Indeed, placed in the frame of its wider educational context, literature circles would seem to be a perfectly appropriate mode of learning for students who are expected to sharpen their skills in critical thinking and communication. Now, the question is: how about our students? How would they feel about literature circles in their English classes? In the following, I shall describe the questionnaire survey conducted to examine students’ own responses to this style of learning.

3. The survey

3.1 The course and participants

The exploratory nature of this study, thus, resulted from my own intellectual curiosity as to my Japanese students’ perceptions of this relatively unfamiliar style of learning. It was also hoped that probing students’ responses might offer direction for future areas of inquiry as well as course improvement. Before I move on to provide the details of the survey, though, I would like to describe the course and participants as this would be essential part of the study.

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. It was a non-streamed course and thus I had a mixture of students with different levels of proficiency. As there was a perceived general tendency that students exhibited more advanced reading proficiency compared with their spoken and listening skills, the course objectives were set as follows: to develop students’ reading fluency and communication skills in English through a range of student-centred activities designed to stimulate responses and promote social interactions in the classroom.

The classes met for 13 weekly sessions respectively for one semester, each session lasting for 105 minutes. Each class had approximately 30 students, and the university adopting the late specialisation model whereby students spend the first two years in the Junior Division before proceeding to study their main subjects of study, 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.

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 in English.

3.2 The coursebook

British author Zadie Smith's 2013 novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* served as the coursebook. As in many of her other works, the novella is set in present-day multicultural London, with her characters reflecting the metropolis' diversity in terms of its race, ethnicity and culture. It tells a story of a young migrant worker Fatou. Her passport and wages are withheld by her employer and the narrative is interspersed with flashbacks that reveal her hardships in the past. Despite the precarious condition under which she is kept, Fatou concludes that "on balance," she is not a "slave." The story ends abruptly when she gets fired for no apparent reason.

The reasons for selecting this novella as the coursebook is threefold. At first glance, the language of *The Embassy of Cambodia* appears straightforward, mostly consisting of simple sentence constructions. Closer inspection reveals, however, that Smith keeps many details unexplained and "chooses not to expand on characters and dialogues, leaving them to the imagination of the reader instead" (Khan, 2014, p. 1). Another significant textual feature to note is the symbolic meaning of the sports employed in the text. The frequent descriptions of swimming and badminton not only give a steady rhythm to the prose but also tacitly relay a conceptual metaphor 'LIFE IS A GAME OF SPORTS.' The text thus challenges "the students' intelligence without making unreasonable demands on their knowledge of the language" (Nuttall, 1996, p. 179) which, in turn, allows students to work on multiple skills such as inferencing and analytical thinking.

Furthermore, the social dimension that the text evokes is worthy of note. With the protagonist being so called "modern day slave" surviving exploitative circumstances, the text poses questions about current social issues, including but not limited to, poverty and inequality, racial tensions as well as the limits of empathy. The novella thus could be used as a launch pad for discussions, to promote the intellectual and moral growth of students. In addition, *The Embassy of Cambodia* is also available as an audio recording, which means it could give students exposure to various features of current spoken English, no less significant elements in developing their communicative competence.

3.3 The research approach and design

Drawing upon the recommendations by Dörnyei (2010), the preliminary questionnaire survey was conducted in January 2017. 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 5 to 1. The category 5 stands for “Strongly agree” and 1 “Strongly disagree.” To elicit answers and issues not previously anticipated, a short-answer question inviting reflective comments about the course was included at the end with some blank space for the respondents to fill.

The data collected was then processed. Due to limited resources, average scores of the responses to the closed-ended section of the questionnaire were calculated manually, using a pocket calculator. Meanwhile, the voluntary responses to the short-answer/ open-ended question were sorted and processed by means of qualitative content analysis. Accordingly, I examined each person’s response for any “distinct content elements, substantive statements, or key points.” Then, based on the ideas and concepts extracted this way, broader categories were formed to describe the content of the response “in a way that allows for comparisons with other responses.” (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 99)

4. The results and discussion

4.1 The results

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). All students gave their consent for their data to be used for educational and research purposes.

Table 1.

n=53

1. Group activities and presentations were useful in understanding the text.	4.0*	
2. The Summariser role was especially useful.	3.9	
3. The Word Master role was especially useful.		3.3
4. The Culture Collector role was especially useful.	4.1	
5. The Discussion Leader role was especially useful.	4.2	
6. Giving a presentation in English enhanced my English communication.	3.3	
7. Exchanging opinions in English enhanced my English communication.	3.3	

5. Strongly agree 4. Agree 3. Don’t know 2. Disagree 1. Strongly disagree

* There was one respondent who did not specify their response for the item 1.

4.2 Closed-ended questions

I first asked whether group activities and presentations based on literature circles were useful in helping them to understand the text. 41 students (77 %) responded positively, whereas 11 (20 %) showed their neutrality or disagreement. This latter figure was somewhat higher than previously expected. This might be due to the perceived “difficulty” of the text itself and will be examined in more detail later. 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. 39 students (73 %) indicated their agreement by choosing the categories 5 and 4. 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. For example, one summariser noted the importance of the frequent presence of flashback sequences throughout the book. He turned to an interactive quiz format to highlight the protagonist’s memories and their implications. One group gave a theatrical performance, which tellingly expressed their distinct interpretation of the subtlety and nuance of the scene. Meanwhile, the summariser in another group created a picture-story show to visually trace the journey of the protagonist as a migrant worker.

Despite the seemingly enthusiastic atmosphere the Word Masters generated in the classrooms, their rating was not as high as I had previously anticipated. 27 students (50 %) selected 5 and 4. This seemed puzzling, as I must note that they were indeed highly creative in their effort to make vocabulary learning in context enjoyable and meaningful. While some utilised the power point on the computer, others took this opportunity to display their drawing skills.

In contrast, the Culture Collector role was fairly highly regarded, with 46 students (86 %) selecting 5 and 4. 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 in both Japanese and English.

The Discussion Leader was also fairly highly regarded, with 25 students selected 5, and 18 students 4. While some questions they had presented were more locally concerned with possible meaning(s) of particular words and expressions or one of the character’s remarks or gestures, others were designed to raise our awareness of 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 24 students responded positively to the question, 29 also remained neutral or disagreed with the idea. This will be discussed further in relation to the individual comments to the open-ended question later.

4.3 Open-ended question

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, eight 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. Seven students expressed their frustration in their inability to "see the point," or what the author was trying to get across. This might possibly indicate the desirability of mixed method approach in language teaching where bilingual instruction is provided to endure student comprehension. This might also suggest potential benefits of more systematic scaffolding, with more carefully targeted questions and exercises concerning multiple aspects of the text.

Among the 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 positive role played by the group presentation and class-wide discussions in revealing the sheer diversity in opinions and interpretations.

As for the not-overly enthusiastic comments, five students specifically expressed their frustration at being unable to follow what was being presented in the first place, let alone to participate in the discussions conducted 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. Again, this seems to highlight the need to review her class organisation and management framework on the part of the instructor.

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, congruent with values recognised by active learning. At the same time, however, it would appear to benefit significantly from being 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, preferably through bilingual instruction, might work in favour of students with less confidence. Also, in this respect, the additional roles suggested by Furr (2003) to supplement the original literature circles model, namely, the Connector and the Passage Person, might further enhance students' comprehension of the text. This, in turn, might boost their confidence to communicate, resulting in students' involvement and exploration of their own attitudes and values.

Apart from the comments and observations presented, though, we still have scant evidence for connections between student interaction, enhanced personal involvement and development of their English skills. Furthermore, the issues of assessment and marking would pose some challenging questions. What would a balanced approach look like? What would be the best way to assess individual student performance in collaborative projects like literature circles? How are we supposed to observe someone's intellectual and moral growth in the first place? This would only emphasise the importance of further empirical, more sophisticated research with theoretical grounds and consistency, either qualitative or quantitative, including questionnaire design.

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