JAILA JOURNAL Vol. 5
(March 2019)

Assessment in University Language Classes with Literature Circles: Principles and Practices[1]

Sachiko SHIKODA
The University of Tokyo

Abstract

This article presents a brief survey on the issues surrounding assessment in language education using literature, with a specific focus on a general English course at university, where an adapted form of literature circles serves as an essential pedagogical principle. The flexible and emergent nature of this current research project lends this piece to be not so much of a comprehensive account as a work-in-progress report of an exploratory inquiry, mapping out the terrain and addressing the issues at both conceptual as well as procedural and strategic levels, with suggestions for potential fields for further investigation. It is hoped that this contribution would serve as a springboard for further discussions, inviting diverse responses and opinions.

1. Introduction

In the face of widespread concern that “the arts and humanities are everywhere downsized” (O’Brien, Foreword to Nussbaum, 2016: p.ix), philosopher Martha Nussbaum valiantly defends the role of liberal arts education in a democratic society to cultivate “capacities for critical thinking and reflection” in students (Nussbaum, 2016: p.10). Nussbaum then expresses her allegiance to Socratic pedagogy, whereby classroom interactions and student writing are encouraged, for more than just developing student skills of critical argument. She highlights its continuing relevance in the world today as in the following:

> The idea that one will take responsibility for one’s own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict (p.54).

In the meantime, the similarly enduring value of literature in liberal arts education and beyond has been persistently highlighted by both humanists and scientists alike (Keen, 2007; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Nussbaum, 2016; Pinker: 2004). Closer to home, recognition of the positive benefits of literature “to promote greater understanding and knowledge of human behaviour

(Carter & Long, 1990: p.217)" is shared within the context of foreign language education, as well. In the light of these remarks above of a positive nature, even in this relentlessly divided and isolationist world, where provocatively protectionist moves abound, it begins to seem that literature might indeed continue to offer something that makes life sustainable.

What follows is an exploratory discussion of the issues involved in assessing a range of activities employed in a general English course, where an adapted form of literature circles provides a primary pedagogical framework. First, this article will attempt a rough sketch of the issues in testing and assessment in the foreign language classroom using literature. This will be followed by some descriptions of the actual assessment exercises and questions used in classes by the writer over the years, accompanied by sample responses produced by students to illustrate how principles might be translated into practice. All the students whose works appear in this article gave their consent for their works to be used for educational and research purposes.

The main experience of the writer lies within the context of using literature in English language classes at university, and, consequently, this will be the main focus of the remainder of the article. Moreover, Paran (2010) usefully points out that, when discussing literature in language education, it is important to be aware of the distinction between "*teaching* literature and *using* literature," that is, "a split between teachers who will to teach literature and literary skills, and teachers whose aim is to use literature in the foreign language (FL) classroom for language development purposes (pp.143-144)." Despite the perceived split, however, Paran later notes that there are many positions on such a continuum, or the "cline," between these two opposite ends (p.144). The approach of the writer would certainly fall somewhere in between the two, though perhaps gravitating towards *using* literature for linguistic development and personal growth. For this reason, the expression "using literature in language teaching/ education" will be used in place of "teaching literature."

2. Literature circles in university language classes

2.1 Literature circles: in principle

As early as in the mid 1980s, Brumfit (1986) noted the potential usefulness of a collective approach to literary reading in classes. In his descriptive account of a university course centring on a literary reading community, Brumfit observed: "Students become extremely supportive when there is a structure strong enough to appear authoritative but not strong enough to be authoritarian (Brumfit, 1986: p.260)." In a social climate where increased student involvement in their learning has been promoted, together with the calls for cultivating student critical thinking skills as seen in the remarks above by Nussbaum and others, a pedagogical framework for collective/collaborative learning such as literature circles would seem quite legitimate.

Launched as a student equivalent of adult book clubs in L1 educational context, literature circles are defined 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, 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 for understanding the chapter(s) and explains them in simple English; the Culture Collector reports differences and similarities between the culture represented in the book and their own culture (Daniels, 2002: p.18). The widespread prevalence of literature circles have expanded to include the foreign language classroom in Japan, where Furr (2003) adapted the original model with Japanese university students in mind, by adding two additional roles, the Connector and the Passage Person. With or without any modification in its modus operandi, its potential to enhance student skills in communication, critical thinking, and personal growth has been increasingly welcome in diverse English language courses in university (Brown, 2009; Kusanagi, 2015; Williams, 2011; Shikoda, 2017; Shikoda, 2018).

Nevertheless, as Cohen (1989) asserts, "Grading is the most vexing issue associated with cooperative work in any active learning situation (Cohen quoted in Bowell & Eison, 1991: p.44)," marking student-centred, group-oriented activities poses a series of immensely complicated questions. Indeed, literature circles are no exception. On evaluating such complex, higher-order thinking activities, Daniels (2002) and others suggest alternatives in place of more traditional formal testing. These include assessing either the discussion group as a whole with a specially designed rubric/observation sheet, or each individual student with their end products such as portfolios, book projects, artworks and theatrical productions (Daniels, 2002; Day, Spiegel, McLellan, & Brown, 2002).

2.2 Literature circles: in practice

To keep this discussion in perspective, this section will begin with descriptions of an English language course the writer teaches using an adapted form of literature circles. The course is titled "Let's Read and Discuss" and is offered as one of the elective options for first-year undergraduates regardless of their majors at a university where the writer teaches part-time. It is a non-streamed class with students of varying degrees of proficiency in English. It runs for thirteen weeks, with each weekly session lasting 105 minutes. The maximum number of students in a class is 30 and usually falls between 25 and 30 on average. British author Zadie Smith's 2013 novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* serves as the core textbook. The story centres on a young migrant worker, who works as a domestic servant in suburban London. Permeated with themes and motifs of power and inequality, cultural alienation and human suffering, the novella addresses contemporary social issues, including but not limited to, immigration, racial tensions, poverty, labour exploitation, as well as the limits of empathy in the relentlessly globalised and fragmented world. It would thus be hoped that reading and discussing in groups, i.e., (re-)reading the novella, building up and comparing interpretations, would help students to establish their own engagement with the text and beyond, promoting their intellectual and affective growth. Now the question is: what would be the best way to assess individual student performance in a collaborative project such as literature circles like this? How are we supposed to observe someone's personal growth in the first place?

3. Assessment in the foreign language classroom using literature

3.1 Principles

Highlighting the significance of the impact of language tests on teaching and learning, i.e., the washback effect, Spiro (1991) maintains that "test procedures should be reshaped by the strategies and goals of the classroom" and not vice versa (quoted in Paran, 2010: p.146). The interconnected nature of teaching and testing is further explored in Paran's contribution in the edited collection *Testing the Untestable* (Paran & Sercu, 2010). As washback can both be positive and negative, depending on the type of exercises and testing designs, possible negative outcomes would include: students just cramming for an exam, memorising extratextual facts such as names and dates, professorial interpretations and critical comments, instead of establishing their own engagement and interpretation of the text. Thus, in language classes using literature, Paran stresses: "it is important to collect cumulative evidence of the process of ongoing engagement *with* literature rather than collect summative evidence of knowledge *about* literature (Paran, 2010: p.161-162)."

While these principles might also be applied to other educational contexts in general, what seems to be the salient point about language education using literature is aptly summarised by Hall (2015) in that: "language can never cease to be at the centre of literary (or any other) reading (p.114)." This would appear crucially important, as also recognised by Hall, for those to whom English is not their first language. Anecdotal evidences (i.e., student responses to course evaluation surveys and personal conversations) suggest that literature in language teaching might well benefit from sustained attention to linguistic properties in the text, encouraging students to re-read and engage with the text, before being able to build up their own interpretations as non-native readers/ speakers of English language.

It has to be stressed here that it is by no means the intention of the writer to suggest that there is no more to a literary text than its language. Nor is the writer attempting to devalue the significance of locating a text within its wider contexts, namely, historical, socio-cultural, political as well as literary. Yet, paying due attention to the way in which language works in a text could save students from experiencing a common reaction, phrased by Short and Candlin (1986) as a "flight from the text (p.89)." This refers to "a flight from the text as a formal, linguistic, and aesthetic artefact, into the text as a sequence of events, a series of facts, or a set of behaviours (Carter & Long, 1990: p.215)." Thus, in his account of classroom strategies and activities using

Jane Eyre, Saito (2017: p.38) stresses the prime importance of students' general comprehension of the text. Illustrating multiple approaches to the text, he draws attention to the incontrovertible fact that language proficiency and reading proficiency are inextricably intertwined. Likewise, Carter and Long argue that assessment exercises and tests should "reunite students to the text and its uses of language as the originating centre of their experiences (Carter & Long, 1990: pp.220-221)." For these reasons, an eclectic approach was taken by the writer for the purpose of evaluating student activities and exercises in classes with literature circles. Details will follow in the next section.

3.2 Practices

With a view to finding out what impact reading and discussing a text has had on students, especially upon their personal development in intellectual and affective terms, assessment was conducted on a semi-continuous basis, combining various exercises and testing designs. A student's grade was thus based on activities such as: a group presentation performance; results of vocabulary quizzes and grammar exercises; a group production of an epilogue; reflective comments after discussions as well as an open-book examination in which students produced short essays. In the following, descriptions of group presentations and prompts for short essays are given, in an attempt to illustrate how we might possibly begin to understand the moral and intellectual development of students.

3.2.1 Group presentation

The following procedure for group presentations was actually employed by the writer. After instructions and role sheets were given, students were asked to conduct literature circles outside class, before coming to the session to present their findings in English. Each group was given a 40-minute slot to deliver their presentations (including a Q & A session). Taking up roughly a sixth of the available course time, this could be thought to be a significant sacrifice in terms of class time. Nonetheless, these sessions provided opportunities for meaningful communication where students were able to express and compare their findings and opinions in the target language. Students were also given a list of evaluation criteria covering the content and delivery in advance. The items included were: overall impression; structure and organisation; manner of speaking (volume and speed); eye contact and body language. They were thus already acquainted with the reasonable level of quality they were expected to achieve in terms of performance. Content-wise, as well, they had the role sheets with specific instructions against which their projects were to be benchmarked. Each group's mark was determined by averaging the individual members' performances, ensuring individual accountability within the group (Bonwell & Eison, 1990: p.44). To ensure active participation and contribution by audience members, several minutes were kept for personal reflection after each presentation session, in which students filled out comment forms.

The flexible nature of pedagogical activities such as literature circles would seem to encourage expression of personal creativity. This means that the range of student responses could be (pleasantly) unforeseeable. Presented below is a poem composed by one student whose group had been assigned to work on the first three chapters of the novella *The Embassy of Cambodia*:

We wonder why an embassy is here
And there is nothing to hear
We doubt someone is inside
We can't help thinking the word "genocide"

Although this student happens to write in verse for pleasure in his own time, this short piece might serve to corroborate that this group of students did not just confirm their horizons, i.e., successfully processing the text, but also expanded them by applying the knowledge to a new situation and connecting the text with their own life. Although limited space here means that one has to be highly selective in presenting samples of student responses, another example is by a group of students who assembled a story-telling slide show visually tracing the itinerary route of the protagonist as a migrant worker from her native Ivory Coast, via Ghana, Libya, Italy and finally to London, highlighting the similarity of the situation in the text with the ongoing refugee crises in Europe. In other words, such a framework could possibly be exploited to produce not only indications for student processing of a text written in English but also indications for student engagement with the text and something that might possibly be called personal growth.

3.2.2 End of semester examination

End of semester examinations actually conducted by the writer in the academic year 2018-2019 consisted of two parts: the first part focusing on language and general comprehension, which included questions on vocabulary, translation and interpretation in a more traditional vein. In contrast, the second part was designed to seek personal response to the text. The instructions were given in Japanese throughout and, except for the essay-type question, the students answered in Japanese. In the remainder of this section, a brief account of the second part of the examination questions will follow.

The essay-type question asked students to read an unseen text and provide comments in English. This was an open book examination and students were provided with a photocopy of the entire novella to refer to during the examination. It was hoped that this type of question would allow scope for personal response, and enable students to apply their knowledge to a new situation as well as connecting the text with life experience outside the classroom including their own. To this end, extracts were presented of materials, including an author interview from *The New Yorker* magazine (Leyshon, 2013) and a book review from the British newspaper *The Guardian* (Hensher, 2013). Students were asked to comment in response to these passages concerning one of the central themes of the novella, such as inequality and the limit of empathy in relation to the contemporary world. The purpose of this type of question was to invite students to reflect on their own life experiences, while referring to the texts, and explain their ideas in English in around 150-250 words.

This was essentially a variation of what students had done on a weekly basis throughout the course. That is, students were expected to learn how to read critically and engage with complicated moral issues, analysing them from multiple perspectives, making connections between the text and the real world, by participating in discussions each week. This time though, they were asked to demonstrate this combination of skills with an unseen text, more akin to an authentic intellectual encounter outside the classroom. The idea was to be able to see clearly how students might use the target language in order to articulate their response. With this type of question, though, linguistic accuracy was not to be penalised, unless the answer was utterly incomprehensible. Instead, students were assessed on their language output in terms of content, according to some of the items in the set of criteria designed by Collie and Slater (1987) for marking a short essay. The list includes: familiarity with the work; systematic and logical development of the argument; ample quotes from the book for illustration; relevance and originality (Collie & Slater, 1987: p.254). In addition, so as to remain consistent with the classroom exercises and activities with a primary focus on language, comments on the author or novella within any historical or biographical frame were not invited, though not penalised if included.

Conclusion

This article first presented a broad overview of the issues involved in assessment in language education using literature, with specific reference to a general English course at a university, where an adapted form of literature circles served as a major pedagogical principle. It subsequently showed the ways in which the principles might be translated into various activities and exercises designed for assessment. What may unite this somewhat eclectic collection of procedures is the belief that language proficiency and reading proficiency are inextricably linked, and that any meaningful communication and social interaction would presuppose this premise.

Nonetheless, the scope of this article is severely limited, as the focus is on a very specific and local context. Thus, it is hardly my intention to pretend that any of the ideas or suggestions presented above could be put into general practice with confidence. Moreover, only a passing glance has been cast on the salient issue of marking schemes and criteria and thus more rigorous analyses need to be conducted.

This is an extremely rich terrain to be further explored. With the potential of literary texts in foreign language education being continually highlighted, the issue of testing and assessment positively invites further investigation at both conceptual as well as procedural and strategic levels.

Notes

[1] This paper is a written version and development of a paper presented at the 90th General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, 19 May 2018. I would like to thank Caroline Kano and two anonymous readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References

Bonwell, C. C. and Eison, J. A. (1991). *Active Learning*: *Creating Excitement in the Classroom*. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, School of Education and Human Development.

Brown, H. (2009). Literature circles for critical thinking in global issues classes. *The Language Teacher*, 33 (10), 16-17.

Brumfit, C.J. and Carter, R. A. (Eds.) (1986). *Literature and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carter, R. A. and Long, M. N. (1990). Testing literature in EFL classes: tradition and innovation. *ELT Journal*. 44 (3), 215–221, 1 July.

Collie, J. and Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the Language Classroom: A resource book of ideas and activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Daniels, H. (2002). *Literature Circles Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2nd ed.). York, Me.: Stenhouse.

Day, J. P., Spiegel, D. L., McLellan, J., and Brown, V. B. (2002). *Moving Forward with Literature Circles*. New York: Scholastic.

Furr, M. (2003). Literature Circles for the EFL Classroom. *Proceedings of the 2003 TESOL Arabia Conference*. Retrieved from http://www.eflliteraturecircles.com/litcirclesforEFL.pdf

Hall, G. (2015). *Literature in Language Education.* 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hensher, P. (2013, November 1). Philip Hensher: why small is sweet. *The Guardian.* Retrieved November 7, 2016 from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/01/philip-hensher-why-short-is-sweet

Keen, S. (2007). *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kidd, D. C. and Castano, E. (2013). Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind. *Science*, 342 (6156), 377-380.

Kusanagi, Y. (2015). Reading Circles and Essay Activities for Medical Students. In M. Teranishi, Y. Saito, and K. Wales (Eds.), *Literature and Language Learning in the EFL Classroom* (pp. 212-228). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and Language Teaching; A guide for teachers and trainers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leyshon, C. (2013, February 3). This Week in Fiction: Zadie Smith. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/book/ page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-zadie-smith-2

Nussbaum, M. (2016). *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Need the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Paran, A. (2010). Between Scylla and Charybdis: The Dilemmas of Testing Language and Literature. In A. Paran and L. Sercu (Eds.), *Testing the Untestable in Language Education* (pp.143-164). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Pinker, S. (2004). The Seed Salon: Steven Pinker and Rebecca Goldstein. *Seed* 10, 44-49, 97-99. Retrieved from https://www.stevenpinker.com/publications/seed-salon-steven-pinker-and-rebecca-goldstein

斎藤兆史.「文学研究と語学学習—『ジェイン・エア』のバーサの表象に着目した授業案」. 日本英文学会（関東支部）編『教室の英文学/ Approaches to Teaching English Literature』東京：研究社, 2017.

Shelton-Strong, S. J. (2012). Literature Circles in ELT. *ELT Journal*, *66* (2), 214-223.

Shikoda, S. (2017). Teaching Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) in the EFL Classroom. *Conference proceedings of the 12th meeting of the ELSJ Kanto regional chapter* (Summer 2016), 167-168.

Shikoda, S. (2018). Practices and Perceptions of Literature Circles in the EFL Classroom. *JAILA Journal*, 4, 109-118.

Shohamy, E. and Hornberger, N. H. (Eds.) (2008). *Encyclopedia of Language and Education. Volume 7: Language Testing and Assessment*. (2nd edn). New York: Springer.

Short, M. H. and Candlin, C. N. (1986). Teaching Study Skills for English Literature. In C. J. Brumfit and R. A. Carter (Eds.), *Literature and Language Teaching* (pp. 89-109). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Z. (2013). *The Embassy of Cambodia*. London: Penguin.

Williams, D. (2011). A new approach to reading/ discussion focused language learning. *Josai International University Bulletin*, 65-82.