Developing Listening and Speaking Skills through Literature Circles

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As English-teaching faculty within a Japanese university, we as teachers are responsible for nurturing many aspects of our students' emerging competence in English as a second/foreign language (L2). Some of these aspects are taught in classes which focus on, for example, English grammar and syntax, the segmental pronunciation of short vowels, or the Greek & Latin word-roots of certain English vocabulary. These classes focus primarily on the structure of the language. Other aspects are addressed in classes that focus on the communicative nature of the language. Listening and speaking classes, public speaking, and discussion & debate courses help develop students' skills in these areas. Learning about the literature, art and culture associated with the L2 forms another intrinsic part of the university's English curriculum.

In recent years, discussion circles/literature circles (LCs) have received widespread and increasing interest from language-teaching professionals (Brown, 2009; Furr, 2007; Jolly & Miles, 2009; Williams, 2010). LCs have been shown to share with both Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task Based Learning (TBL) features which generate genuine learning opportunities. Moreover, one of the shared aims of CLT and LCs is to provide an environment whereby students can readily develop fluency in listening and speaking. In LC classrooms this happens within the discussion circle, where natural and meaningful interaction takes place through the negotiation of

meaning, the fine-tuning of understanding, and the use of communication strategies (Shelton-Strong, 2012; Willis & Willis, 2009). In an influential book, applied linguist Ur (1984: 24) puts this form of instruction center-stage when she declares:

> discussions or discussion-activities are the best vehicle for fluency practice in a foreign language: the question is how to make them maximally effective.

In this paper, I hope to address this question. I will explore how best to nurture our students' communicative language needs through the effective use of discussion circles. I will examine the rationale, procedures, and students' perceptions of communicative language courses which aim to develop listening and speaking skills through LCs, the underlying assumption being that LCs offer a pedagogically firm foundation for second language acquisition (SLA) to occur in university language classrooms.

Discussion Roles

LCs provide two elements that are not always evident in many listening and speaking skills courses: material that is both comprehensible and interesting to talk about, and a framework which makes having a real discussion in English an achievable goal for students (Furr, 2007). The L2 literature circle as set out by Furr (2007; 2011), is a group of six students in which each person carries out a different reading task for the same story prior to the discussion of it.

Each member of the group reads the story from a different perspective, and makes notes in English in order to prepare for a group discussion based on their reading. Accordingly, students learn that: (a) there are a number of different reasons for reading, and (b) there are varying perspectives on any

given text.

Furr (2007; 2011) suggests six roles for fictional texts with each having a specific set of instructions detailed on a role sheet. (Roles can be adjusted for non-fiction texts). Students fill out the role sheet while reading and use it as the basis for their group discussion. The different reading roles include Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Connector, Culture Collector Word Master, and Passage Person. As language support, students are provided with examples of completed roles sheets from Furr (2011).

The Discussion Leader (DL) directs the discussion and ensures that each member continually participates. The DLs start the discussion with a few open-ended general questions about the story, and then proceed to call on individual group members to share their findings with the group. As language support, DLs are provided with a discussion-circle speaking rubric from which to work. This rubric has proved popular if not essential for certain students, especially those who are initially anxious about speaking in front of their group in English.

The Summarizer outlines the main characters and key events, and produces a brief, but complete, summary of the plot. They retell the story in their own words choosing only the most significant events in the story. In class, they read aloud/present their summary twice, and the DL asks the group questions about the summary or for their comments on it.

The Connector establishes two connections between events in the narrative or its characters and the real world. Students often say it is a very difficult role when they first start LCs. The Connector will, for instance, make connections between the thoughts, feelings, or actions of characters in the story and those of their own family members, friends, or classmates. The DL asks the group for their comments on these connections, and asks if they can make any connections of their own.

The Culture Collector (CC) notes and explains comparisons and contrasts

between the culture found in the story and the group's home culture. Students sometimes struggle with the historical and cultural backgrounds of the stories we read for LCs. However, having one student focus on cultural issues adds a further level of interest and complexity to the discussions. The CC role is optional until the groups have done three/four discussions or the class is at an advanced level (B2-C2).

While the above four roles prepare for discussion of the story from a global standpoint, the following two roles focus more closely on single words/ phrases and short passages.

The Word Master (WM) chooses five words in the text, explains their meanings in the context of the story, and gives their reasons for choosing them. WMs are told that they should not only look for unknown or difficult words, but also for special uses of high-frequency words. DLs will ask the group for comments on these five words, and go on to ask members "which other words do you think are important?".

The Passage Person (PP) selects three interesting passages from the story and reads them aloud to the group. The PP explains their reasons for choosing the passages, and, at the DLs prompting, goes on to ask other members questions about them. The PP may also select passages which they find confusing. They then ask the group for help in understanding them. Some of the best discussion occurs as students try to figure out difficult passages together.

LCs using these six roles expose students to more ideas than if they were working alone. As students naturally become more engaged in a story, they point to words, phrases or passages to support opinions, and question each other on deeper or alternative meanings of the text. Being highly student-centered, LCs strengthen student interaction, enhance classroom community, and cultivate friendships and collaboration (Daniels, 2002).

Implementing Literature Circles in the Classroom

After the roles are carefully introduced, role sheets are distributed and each student is given a reading schedule. Then, students choose or may be assigned a role. Initially, they are assigned two/three very short stories (around 2-3 pages in a graded reader). Students are then required to read and prepare their particular role for discussion in the next class.

LCs ask students to have meaningful discussions about stories that they have read. Thus, it is important for the teacher to choose appropriately graded reading materials which students can read without using a dictionary. As above, it is best to start with a graded reader that is one level below the students' actual reading level because LCs are based on the ability of our students, not only to read, but also to discuss the texts in English, so the materials must be manageable (Furr, 2007).

The recycling of vocabulary in LCs is an important means for students to learn new words (Maher, 2010). One way to recycle key vocabulary in a story is to create vocabulary lists which students pre-study before the actual reading. If they study the lists and take a quiz before the actual reading, they will be at an advantage when they encounter the words again in the context of the story to be discussed.

During discussions, the teacher's role is to monitor group interactions and help students collectively understand the text (Furr, 2011). For instance, while going around the class, the teacher might note problems with new words/ phrases, ambiguous scenes, or cultural background. At the conclusion/review stage, these issues are addressed to determine degree of collective understanding among the groups, and finally any remaining issues are resolved by the teacher.

Students' Perceptions of Literature Circles

To determine students' perceptions of LCs and their effectiveness in developing listening and speaking skills, the following three research questions were investigated.

1. How do students define a successful discussion?
2. How are the different discussion roles perceived?
3. How much have their listening and speaking skills improved?

To ascertain students' reactions to using the LCs in the language classroom, a 15-item, self-evaluation questionnaire was developed. This included seven 5-point Likert-type items and eight open-ended questions asking for written responses (see Appendix B for the list of the questions). The questionnaire was administered to three separate groups of students (n = 57) studying courses in: (a) second-year conversation, (b) second-year speaking skills, and (c) third-year literature & culture at a private university in Japan. Students were informed of the purpose of the questionnaire and given 20 minutes during class to complete it. Students were assigned three teacher-selected, graded-reader collections of short stories as their texts (see Appendix A for the titles).

Results

Discussions that Worked

Responding to Q2 on the questionnaire "Which was the best story discussion this semester? Why was it successful?" First of all, 98% of the students felt that the discussions were indeed successful. They provided the story title which worked for them, followed by their reasons why the discussion succeeded. Typical responses from (c) group were, "Everyone had

many ideas," and "there were many interesting comments and opinions on [*The Third Party*], so we talked a lot". Similarly, the story *Men and Women*, "had many points to discuss," and "we talked about [connections] to the real world". *Lord McDonald*, "was a difficult story, but I could understand the story after discussion" and although, "I didn't understand the content deeply, my friends gave me some hints". Similarly, groups (a) and (b) declared, "we all like mysterious stories and our discussion [of *Omega File 349*] was very fun", and when discussing the story *Sister Love*, "everyone was talkactive (sic)". As can be seen, there was considerable interaction between students in their LCs and a clear motivation to listen, understand, and speak during discussions.

Popularity of Roles

The responses to Q5 on the questionnaire indicated that the most popular LC roles for (a) group and (b) group were Word Master (48%) and Passage Person (37%), followed by DL (28%). The least popular role by far was Summarizer (7%). Connector was also deemed challenging, garnering only 22% of the top two ranks. The Culture Collector role was not offered to (a) group, and only latterly to (b) group because the students were new to LCs.

Highlighting the popularity of Word Master, one second-year student stated, "I enjoyed choosing important words", while another responded, "It's an easy role to prepare". The Passage Person role allowed one student, "to find my favorite passages," while a classmate responded, "I can understand the story deeply". DL was considered favorably by this student who declared, "I like to ask everyone questions". Conversely, the Summarizer role was considered "difficult and took a long time" by a number of students. While the Connector role was generally found to be difficult, with numerous responses such as "it was not easy to connect the story to my experience", there were some who enjoyed the role, saying, "It was fun to think of connections to the real world".

With regard to (c) group, the responses to Q5 on the questionnaire indicated that the most popular LC roles were DL (38%), Passage Person (33%), followed by Connector (26%). Again, the least popular role was Summarizer (12%). Culture Collector was generally considered a difficult role with only 15% of students giving it a top rank. These third-year students seemed, however, to respond well to the challenges of the more interactive and creative roles. One student said that she liked the DL role because, "I like to speak English and the DL can speak much". Regarding the role of Connector, another commented that, "comparing the real world and the story was fun". Culture Collector was considered a worthwhile challenge by these two students who said, "I can share opinions with others about new points of [Irish] culture" and "I can learn some cultural things from different viewpoints every time." Thus, although the roles posed some challenges, most students rose to those challenges and actively engaged in the discussions. It was clear that students evaluated the LC roles differently, but had a clear preference for Word Master, Passage Person and DL.

Improved listening and speaking skills

Responding to Q3 on the questionnaire, "Did your listening and speaking skills improve on this course?" 96% of students felt that the discussions helped them build their listening and speaking skills. This response is to be expected as increased communicative competence in English is a main goal of courses (a) and (b), and a minor goal of course (c). However, as can be seen here, from this (c) group student who seemed particularly pleased with her progress, "Yes, [because] I told group members my opinion many times, so I could improve my speaking skill". While her classmate was similarly motivated and rewarded, "Yes, [because] I tried to speak and listen hard every week". Others were perhaps a little more reflective, saying that, "I think so, [but] to explain how I felt is challenging", and "Yes, [but] I still have

lots of room to improve my speaking skill". Typical responses from groups (a) and (b) were, "Yes, I could gradually get a good discussion", and "Every week I talked [in] English very much, so I can speak English well [now]". Thus, most students were satisfied with their progress, while some were pleasantly surprised at their improvement.

In student self-evaluation, the seven closed questions about the LC experience revealed very positive responses (See Figure 1). Students stated that they understood the text better because of the literature circles (4.6 out of a possible 5 on a Likert scale) and their understanding of key words/ phrases and idioms also improved through discussions (4.1 out of 5). In addition, all students either agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to participate in a literature-circle class again in the future (4.2 out of 5).

Literature Circle discussions are a good way to understand a text.	4.6
Literature Circles are a good way to learn about vocabulary and idioms.	4.1
Literature Circles are a good way to develop cross-cultural awareness.	4.2
Literature Circles are good for developing critical thinking skills.	4.3
Listening to extracts of the stories on audio CD was useful.	4.0
Explaining pictures of impressive scenes in the stories was useful.	4.4
I would like to study English again by using Literature circles.	4.2

Figure 1. Results of Survey on LCs: Scores shown on 5-point scale

Discussion

Students' responses to the self-evaluation prompts showed that they realized the potential of LCs in fostering listening and speaking skills, while simultaneously improving their understanding of cultural issues and developing critical thinking. Thus, the discussion roles boosted communicative competence and raised the level of understanding of the stories and their themes.　In addition, LCs were regarded overall as both enjoyable and engaging.

The role sheets set LCs apart from other discussion approaches to L2 studies, but according to the results here, not all the roles were equally popular. The popularity of Word Master and Passage Person may have been in response to the majority of students being motivated to study English, but not being overly confident of their discussion skills. The DL role, however, was often chosen for its ease of preparation, or by students who simply liked to lead, rather than follow, or by those who wished to speak in English for the maximum amount of time.

The less popular role of Summarizer was not unexpected. It seems that students found it both difficult and tiresome. However, with practice students eventually get better at this task. Further, the low rating given to Connector by (a) group and (b) group may be because of the novelty factor. Students in their previous studies had rarely been asked to make such connections. Interestingly, this role often becomes more popular as students do more rounds of discussion. It is also the one role that provides more insights into classmates' lives, as their connections are often presented as anecdotes. As such, this role naturally primes conversational story-telling skills.

Conclusion

As well as boosting L2 communicative competence, LCs increase students' abilities to interpret and critically evaluate stories. Students who have difficulty understanding certain passages on their own, can consult with others in their circle to determine meaning and significance. Thus, through the completion of role sheets, students can: (i) develop their reading comprehension skills, (ii) enhance their ability to approach texts from different angles, and (iii) engage in meaningful discussions and thereby considerably improve their skills in listening and speaking.

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Appendix A

(a) *Bookworms Club Bronze: Stories for Reading Circles*, Stages 1 & 2, by M. Furr (Oxford University Press, 2007)

(b) *Bookworms Club Coral: Stories for Reading Circles*, Stages 3 & 4, by M. Furr (Oxford University Press, 2008)

(c) *Treading on Dreams: Short Stories from Ireland*, Stage 5, by J. Bassett (Oxford University Press, 2009)

Appendix B
Research Questionnaire

In this class, we studied English texts using role sheets and discussion groups. This method is known as Literature Circles. I would like to know your opinions about this.

Please answer the questions below to help me understand what you think about Literature Circles. Thank you for your help. Your opinions are very valuable.

1. Which was your favorite story this semester? _____
   Why did you like it? _____

2. Which was the best story discussion this semester? _____
   Why was it successful? _____

3. Did your listening and speaking skills improve on this course? _____
   Comment: _____

4. How long did you usually spend reading and preparing your role for class?
   _____

5. Please rank the six roles in order of preference. (favorite 1-2-3-4-5-6 least favorite).
   Then, please explain your ranking.
                     Rank   Reason
   Discussion Leader _____
   Summarizer   _____
   Connector   _____
   Word Master   _____
   Passage Person   _____
   Culture Collector _____

   For questions 6-12, please mark one of the five responses:

   (a) I strongly agree (b) I agree (c) I neither agree nor disagree
   (d) I disagree (e) I strongly disagree

6. Literature Circles are a good way to understand a text. _____

7. Literature Circles are a good way to learn about vocabulary and idioms. _____

8. Literature Circles are a good way to develop cross-cultural awareness. _____

9. Literature Circles are good for developing critical thinking skills. _____

10. Listening to extracts of the stories on audio CD was useful. _____

11. Explaining pictures of impressive scenes in the stories was useful. _____

12. I would like to study English again by using Literature Circles. _____

For questions 13-15, please write your answers in the spaces provided.

13. In your opinion, how do Literature Circles compare to other ways of studying a text?

_____

_____

_____

14. Please write about your overall impression of using Literature Circles.

_____

_____

_____

15. Do you have any other comments about Literature Circles?

_____

_____

_____

Adapted from Williams (2010)