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Taking a literature circles approach to teach Academic English

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Abstract

Literature circles (LC), an activity framework for classroom discussion, has been adapted for EFL classes to help students engage more deeply with reading texts. In this approach, students read texts outside of class, and discuss the texts in class, using a specified discussion framework. Originally developed for L1 classes as a tool for teaching literature, LC has been adapted for EFL classes, not only to help develop reading skills, but also to help students develop their discussion skills. However, to date, many adaptations of LC have relied on graded fiction as source material, which is not always appropriate for tertiary education. Feeling pressure to match course content with the labour market needs of our contemporary global society, English departments are increasingly being asked to include more academic content in their classes. This requires that non-fiction be used as source material. This preliminary study examines student perceptions of an LC class using non-fiction as source material. The subjects of this short, qualitative, pilot study were engineering students at a university in Japan. Procedures of the class and the issues that emerged are discussed.

Key words: SLA, EAP, EFL, literature circles, reading, discussion

Introduction

An ability to understand and use English in academic domains has become an essential skill for those wishing to pursue careers in international fields such as science and technology. In all of these fields, a lack of proficiency in academic English can reduce one's access to information needed for career development and advancement. As Nunan (2003, p. 590) points out "English is currently the undisputed language of science and technology", and the large majority of academic papers in the fields of science and technology are published in English. In many fields English is the prime medium through which information is disseminated, and this has transformed the educational landscape of countless students around the world.

In its latest white paper released in 2012, the *Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology* (MEXT) stated that “it is essential to train human resources that can play an active role in the international community” as “major changes in the international community and the environment surrounding Japan, including the deepening complexity or interdependence between countries” require that participants in the international community have proficient communication skills. According to the current *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization*, issued by MEXT, the government is instituting reform plans aimed at promoting the establishment of an education environment that nurtures “the ability to understand abstract content for a wide range of topics, and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons”. In order to see these goals met, MEXT is encouraging that classes be done in English, and in addition include many higher-level linguistic tasks, such as presentation, debate, summation and negotiation.

To realize such goals, educational organizations in Japan are moving to include more *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP) in their programs and institute classes where English is used as a medium of instruction (EMI). While EMI programs have been common in countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong for some time, they are still fledgling in Japan. However, an example of Japan’s push to establish EMI programs is the *Global 30* program, a project started by the Japanese government, which aims to have 300,000 international students studying at Japanese universities. According to *Higher Education in Japan*, a MEXT document from 2012: “In order to strengthen the international competitiveness of Japanese higher education and to offer attractive and high-quality education for international students, it is very vital to develop universities as centers for internationalization, in which many international students and professors are welcome and enjoy high-quality education and research.”

To these ends, the Japanese government has selected 13 universities to develop EMI programs for both international students coming to Japan and Japanese students interested in studying through the medium of English. However, while these 13 universities have received funding and support to institute EMI, there are also many other universities that have implemented EMI classes. However, often these classes are offered on an *ad hoc* basis. Many of these EMI classes are simply one or two seminar classes taught by a foreign language teacher, with academic credit given under the rubric of an English elective. While a few other EMI programs are semi-structured, with some

required classes related to a student's major taught in English (Brown & Iyobe, 2014).

However, the route to creating a more globally communicative cohort of Japanese graduates is not simply to throw them into EMI classes. Many Japanese students have poorly developed listening skills and are unable to aurally comprehend words that they know (see for example Graham-Marr, 2015). This inability to aurally comprehend known language is a severe handicap. While practice gained in EMI classes could help alleviate some of these difficulties, guided practice with a more systemic approach might be more beneficial. In addition, many of the skills associated with academic English, such as summarizing, paraphrasing, synthesizing, comparing and contrasting require higher-level linguistic skills. That is, the ability to perform difficult tasks is closely linked to ones overall proficiency. Using the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) as a guideline, the majority of Japanese university students can be said to have proficiency levels in the CEFR A2 to CEFR B1 range. However, suggested proficiency levels needed to handle academic English and EMI classes begin at a CEFR B2 level. That is, CEFR A2 and B1 students cannot be reasonably expected to handle academic tasks. (see table 1 below)

	Overall oral production
B2	Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points, and relevant supporting detail.
B1	Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.
A2	Can give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes, etc. as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list.

Table 1: CEFR Levels of Proficiency for Oral Production

If A2 or B1 level students are to be given more academic tasks in their classes, they need to be given greater support to help them do these tasks. Students need help in not only understanding the longer pieces of text associated with academic English, but also in collating and synthesizing the information in these texts in order to summarize or paraphrase such texts.

However, students have rarely been given the chance to use English as a tool for communicating information, due to the demands of the university entrance exam oriented English education system. Academic skills such as summarizing are not often attended to in Japan's test driven education system. Thus, the adoption of a Literature Circles (LC) framework might provide students with more opportunities to practice these skills in a structured format.

Source material

The source materials for this class were graded texts written and prepared specifically for this study. Topics were chosen to match the majors of the students, in this case engineering. As such, students were asked to read and summarize articles on *metal fatigue*, *how dams operate*, *simple machines* and *mechanical advantage*. The articles were all around 1200 words in length. The articles were divided into a Part A and Part B, each about 600 words in length.

Each article was written for students with a high CEFR A2 level of proficiency. Although the CEFR does not clearly specify a vocabulary size for each level, a vocabulary size between 1500 and 2500 words has been recommended as an appropriate level for A2 learners (see for example Milton, 2009, 2010). However, in order to make sure that students could read the articles more fluently, the articles were graded to a 1200 word level using a number of online text-grading tools.

Although texts were simplified, the academic nature of the topics required that a certain number of *illegals*, words that fall outside of the prescribed boundaries, be allowed. However, efforts were made to limit the number of illegals in the text to between 10 and 15 words. These illegals were handled in one of two ways. They were either defined within the text, that is, their meaning could be worked out from the context of their use, or they were taught to students in pre-reading activities.

Class procedure

Students came to class having read for homework an article on a topic related to engineering. In class, students were put into groups of four to discuss the articles according to a set framework. The discussions followed a framework described by Furr (2004) and Graham-Marr (2015b). The four roles were:

- a. *Leader (Ldr)*: responsible for leading the discussion and asking questions
- b. *Summarizer (Sum)*: responsible for summarizing Parts A and B of the article.
- c. *Detail master (DM)*: responsible for answering questions given by the Leader on matters of fine detail.

- d. *Vocabulary master (VM)*: responsible for explaining the meanings of vocabulary chosen from the text.

Once assigned their roles, students were put into groups and began their group discussions. Typically discussion sessions lasted between five and seven minutes. After each session, students then changed groups while maintaining their roles. This allowed for task repetition, which helped students to practice their speaking roles multiple times gaining fluency. In addition, such repetition allowed for greater informal student-student feedback, which helped students attend to any errors. In each class, the discussion sessions were repeated four or five times.

Questions

The present pilot study investigated student opinion about the LC approach using these academic texts. We wanted to elucidate which role was easiest, which role was most difficult, which role was deemed most valuable, and how difficult the texts were. To shed more light on this approach, the following questions were asked.

1. Which role was most difficult?
2. Which role was easiest?
3. Which role helped you improve your English the most?
4. Which role helped you improve your English the least?
5. How were the articles?
6. How was the vocabulary in the articles?
7. How was the grammar in the articles?
8. Do you think summarizing skills are important?

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were 10 engineering university students (6 males and 4 females) studying English in an elective course at a well-regarded science university in Tokyo. The English proficiency of the students was not directly measured, however the entrance exam at the university tends to level students, and most students were evaluated as being between a CEFR A2 level and a low CEFR B1. There were ten students registered in the class, and all participated in the questionnaire.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was written in English. Students were asked to rate items on a Likert scale. In addition, open-ended questions were also asked. Students were allowed to answer these open-ended questions in English or in Japanese.

The Results

As expected the students found the role of *Summarizer* both difficult but very important. Nine out of the ten students said that this role was the most difficult, and all ten students said that the role of summarizer was *important*, with nine out of ten students ranking it as *very important*. However, all ten students rated this activity as *difficult*, which suggests that students need more support to help them develop their summarizing skills. Asked why the role of summarizer was difficult, students mentioned that having to understand the article completely, and having to make up sentences using their own words was quite difficult. See Table 2 for the results on task difficulty.

	Ldr	Sum	DM	VM
1. Which role was most difficult?	0	9	1	0
2. Which role was easiest?	3	0	3	4
3. What role helped you improve the most?	0	10	0	0
4. What role helped you improve the least? *	4	0	1	4

Table 2: Role difficulty and perceived value

* one student said *none*

Ideas on which role was easiest was split between the other three roles. Some people said that the role of *Leader* was easiest, with one noting that “all they had to do was ask questions”. Others said that the role of *Detail Master* was easiest, with one noting that “answering specific questions on specific details was easy”. While others said that the role of *Vocabulary Master* was easiest as they could consult a dictionary, and secondly, one could do the role of *Vocabulary Master* without having fully understood the article.

Student responses as to which role helped them to improve their English most were unambiguous. Everyone chose the role of *Summarizer*, even though they struggled with it. All ten students reported that this role helped them to improve their English the most.

What was interesting was that a majority of students found the articles *easy*, but nonetheless found summarizing difficult. Six described the articles as easy, while four described them as difficult. Seven said that the vocabulary was easy or very easy, while all ten described the grammar as being easy. However, all ten nonetheless said that it as difficult to summarize these passages. Perhaps one reason for this was the length of the articles. Even though the articles were not that long, most of the students had not previously had the opportunity to summarize articles of this length. One student mentioned that the articles were not so difficult, however they took a long time to read. Another student mentioned that although the grammar and vocabulary were not that difficult, the articles were quite long and the subject matter difficult, making it difficult to summarize the articles. See Table 3 for detailed results.

	Very easy	Easy	Difficult	Very difficult
1. Reading passage difficulty	0	6	4	0
2. Vocabulary difficulty	1	6	3	0
3. Grammatical difficulty	2	8	0	0
4. Task difficulty (summarizing)	0	0	9	1

Table 3: Difficulty of source text and task difficulty

Discussion

Students found summarizing difficult. Having to decide what pieces of information were important, and what pieces of information could be glossed over or skipped, requires that one have a fairly clear overall understanding of the whole article. Having an understanding of the gist of the article can be achieved with a basic understanding. However, having to summarize requires a deeper, more complete understanding of the passage.

Furthermore, although students seemed fully aware of the task demands needed to accurately summarize a longer reading passage, some commented that they didn't feel that they had reached a level of proficiency where they might able to more deeply comprehend the passage to a point of being able to clearly and quickly identify the important points. As the texts were somewhat long, picking out peripheral support from the main points is a somewhat more advanced task. Even though the articles were simplified, and a majority of students felt that the articles were easy, the students felt that they didn't have sufficient ability to distill down longer texts into its main pertinent points, with one student

commenting that “it is difficult for pre-intermediate English learners to sum up long passages”.

This finding matches the findings in the CEFR, which describes how deeply students should be able to comprehend an article at different levels of proficiency. See Table 4 below.

Reading for information and argument	
B2	Can obtain information, ideas and opinions from highly specialised sources within his/her field. Can understand specialised articles outside his/her field, provided he/she can use a dictionary occasionally to confirm his/her interpretation of terminology.
B1	Can identify the main conclusions in clearly signalled argumentative texts. Can recognise the line of argument in the treatment of the issue presented, though not necessarily in detail.
A2	Can identify specific information in simpler written material he/she encounters such as letters, brochures and short newspaper articles describing events.

Table 4: Reading skills linked to proficiency levels

Students also pointed to insufficient proficiency in English as being yet another reason why summarizing texts was difficult. Some students mentioned that they had not yet reached a level of sufficient proficiency to appropriately summarize long passages in their own words. The length of the reading passages was such that it was difficult to *borrow* phrases from the initial articles, which forced students to rely on their own linguistic resources. Student mentioned that even though they understood the content, it was nonetheless difficult to summarize the articles in their own words.

The implications seem quite clear. Although the government has perhaps identified a need, and a set of clear goals, the proposed use of EMI to address this need could use more detailed thought and study. This mini pilot study suggests that some sort of bridging program is needed, to help lower proficiency level students step up to these tasks, as for the most part, such students lack sufficient linguistic resources to do these tasks.

According to the *European Common Framework*, students with an A2 level of English proficiency can be expected to give simple descriptions of their living conditions, daily routines, likes and dislikes and so on. However, such students should not be expected to be able to reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of an academic subject, a task demanded of students in EAP programs.

While EAP programs and EMI programs do give students more exposure to the target language, which has been found to lead to meaningful second language acquisition, and while EAP programs do give students the opportunity to output language, needed for the development of both fluency and accuracy, students with insufficient proficiencies are unlikely to benefit from such programs without more detailed support and a greater scaffolding of tasks. In a 2001 study with Indonesian students, Ibrahim found that for many students, before an EMI program can be implemented, “a bridging program and a partial EMI program are necessary at least at the initial stage.” (Ibrahim, 2001, p. 121) This pilot study’s findings mirror those of Ibrahim. This suggests that before an EAP program or EMI program can be implemented, those in positions of power must clearly understand the current abilities of their student. That is, they must look realistically at their students before setting out program goals.

Conclusion

Although the sample size in this pilot was far too small to make any sorts of general conclusions, this study does suggest that EAP and EMI should be more carefully considered in the context of Japan. Government directives pushing schools to adopt an EAP focus, do so without reference to current student ability. Schools and school boards might be better advised to get a better understanding of their students’ abilities before making edicts as to how to improve English education. That is, goal-based directives should be tempered by reality. English education might be better served with sets of *level specific* directives. Program planners need to clearly define the current abilities of their students, before laying out goals. Secondly, such goals must be attainable, given the amount of study time available. Lastly concrete plans, with task difficulty matched to student abilities should be specified. In short, more detailed planning seems necessary.

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