

# Adopting literature circles to content-based instruction

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## 1. Introduction

To help students make the step from the traditional grammar-focused and teacher centered classroom, typified by *yakudoku*, to one based more on real world discussion, language teachers in Japan are continually looking for a tool to give students confidence and fluency, while at the same time maintaining a focus that is engaging for students and enables independent, and critical thinking. These aims are the foundations of much current thinking to task based learning (TBL) approaches to the classroom (Willis and Willis, 2009) and at the same time are highly valued *de facto* skills for students of content studies such as tourism (Hsu, 2005; Kim, Guo, Wang and Agrusa, 2007). Such TBL approaches include the Leader Method (Ward, Wade and Dowling, 2008), Language Portfolios (O'Dwyer, 2009) and general fluency tasks (Kellem, 2009); however it is the literature circle that has received the most widespread, and increasing, interest from language professionals in recent years (Brown, 2008; Furr, 2007; Jolly and Miles, 2009; Shang, 2006; Williams, 2009b). Although known in first language environments as a study/learning tool for as long as 300 years (Daniels, 2002), it is only recently that the literature circle is being used as an effective means to provide students with the skills to equip them for language use beyond the classroom.

## 2. What are literature circles?

Although literature circles have a long history, as a classroom activity their history is much more recent having been revived in the 1980s from the United States tradition of book clubs (Daniels, 2002). As a tool for foreign language learning, however, literature circles are even more contemporary, emerging in earnest since the turn of the millennium. Despite this short history they have already been variously described by language professionals as, “providing a specific framework allowing meaningful discussions about stories in English” (Furr, 2007, p.16); and as a “meaning based, rather than information driven, approach to learning” (Willis and Willis, 2009, p.4), acting to “empower” students (Brown, 2008, p.17) and as a means for students to “reflect on existing knowledge and attitudes” (Shang, 2006). The literature circle can thus be seen to be a multi-faceted, structured approach to reading that gives rise to purposeful and meaningful discussion; highly desirable outcomes for any L2 learner.

The literature circle for language learning as described by Furr (2007) is a group of six student readers in which each reader carries out a different reading task on the same fictional story given to them by their instructor. Furr suggests six roles for fictional texts which he designates as *Discussion Leader*, *Summarizer*, *Connector*, *Word Master*, *Passage Person* and *Culture Collector*. Each of these roles requires students to read the same text with a different goal in mind, with specific instructions and tasks described on a purposely designed role sheet which each reader receives. Students fill out the role sheet and use this as the basis of their group-based fluency discussion. In Furr's model, the different reading tasks include reading for cultural issues, examining vocabulary items and preparing to lead the group in discussion. By having students do different reading tasks, texts become more manageable and meaning becomes more accessible in the discussion stage.

A number of key components help to differentiate literature circles from other L2 learning strategies with reading input. The first of these is that reading should be graded and is thus slightly below the readers natural ability. With extensive rather than intensive input, the need for dictionaries - or other detailed lexical work - is reduced. At the same time, since the input is comprehensible (Krashen, 1983) opportunities for deeper meaningful student utterances and critical thinking in the discussion stage are raised.

The second key component to the literature circle, as intimated above, is the role sheet itself. The role sheet has specific, individual instructions attached to it to ensure students focus on just one task while reading. This role sheet works in tandem with extensive reading input to give students a clear idea about the tasks they should carry out, and provides them with vision for the discussion stage. With each reader holding a different role sheet, the result is a language outcome that is greater than the sum of the individual role sheets (Furr, 2007). This is in stark contrast to the results obtained when students have to juggle multiple language tasks as found in more traditional L2 reading and discussion approaches (Warren-Price, 2007).

A final factor which identifies the literature circle as a superior approach to combining reading with fluency speaking practice is that students discuss the text by working in collaboration and co-operation with one another. In part, this is due to the specific nature of the role sheet itself but also because each member has - by design - a unique contribution to make to the group. Working together ensures that discussion content, pace, direction and lexical complexity are at the students own level rather than at that of the instructor. Moreover, with students in self-contained groups the teacher is free to act as a facilitator and monitor respective groups' discussions. By creating such a democratic language learning environment the tendency for stronger speakers to dominate literature circle discussions has been shown to be reduced (Williams, 2010).

### 3. Limitations of Literature Circles

Despite the over-riding positive benefits of literature circles described above, some issues can arise for teachers trying to implement them into classrooms in Japan. Firstly, as members of an essentially collectivist society, Japanese students are accustomed to teacher centered instruction. Burrows (2008), argues that as a consequence the rationale for a student-focused classroom, and ideas of learner autonomy may be poorly understood (Wollman-Bonilla, 1994). This, Burrows claims, is the result of socio-cultural factors that lead students to have certain expectations about the respective roles of students and teachers in the classroom. Supporting these notions, Seedhouse (1999) even suggests that results from literature circle-type approaches can be “very unimpressive” (p.153).

A second possible challenge for literature circle adoption in Japan is that the axiom, ‘no reading pain, gives no reading gain’ is still widely subscribed to, and as an extensive input / output task, the literature circle goes against this common wisdom. Finally there is also some evidence to show that, in isolated cases, relations between group members may not always be collaborative. Students may experience personality clashes with other group members leading to the co-operative spirit of the group being compromised.

Doubtlessly, these arguments do have *some* validity, but they should be seen as *minor* caveats to the overwhelming benefits of literature circles. There is a range of Japan-based research (Brown, 2008; Furr, 2007; Williams, 2010) that has shown that not only do students *themselves* express a preference for reading circles over other forms of reading study, but problems of poor group dynamics represent an insignificant number of cases. When weighed against the limited language practice in *yakudoku* classes or less structured free fluency approaches, there is little doubt that the literature circle (and, by extension the CBRC) is advantageous to L2 study, and *can* be successfully applied to Japan’s particular socio-cultural circumstances (Willis and Willis, 2009). In addition, by using extensive language input other benefits such as vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 1997) or gains in standardized test scores such as TOEIC may also be implied (Williams, 2009a).

### 4. From Literature Circle to Content-based Reading Circle

As the name ‘literature circle’ suggests discussion is designed to be predominately about fiction-based materials. Although this is a very important aspect of language learning, students also need to be able to discuss and analyze content in preparation for the world beyond the classroom. This is particularly so for students studying vocational subjects such as tourism for

which communication and expression of ideas are of particular importance (Hsu, 2005). As an instructor of socio-cultural content, I wanted to utilize the fiction-based literature circle format to make content more accessible, engaging and meaningful to learners. The result is the content-based reading circle (CBRC). Although the subject material in fiction and non-fiction circles may be different, applying the principles of literature circles to CBRC required only minor adjustments to Furr's model.

Firstly, instead of the six roles – described above – the CBRC employs just four roles. This is partly because one of the literature circle roles (i.e. *Passage Person*) is redundant to content-based materials but also because, from my own experience, I found having six roles gave fewer opportunities for fluency practice and engaged the groups less well. For the CBRC, I thus eliminated the “passage person” role (who highlights characters in a story) and, then combined the “culture collector” and “connector” roles to form a *Culture Connector* role. Each group of four in the CBRC thus comprises: a *Group Leader* to keep discussion going, raise questions and delegate time; a *Summarizer*; a *Word Master*, who selects important words, phrases or collocations from the text; and a *Culture Connector* who highlights the cultural associations and/or differences between the culture represented in the text and that of the students or the students' experiences. By making these changes the integral macro (i.e. *Group Leader* and *Summarizer*) and micro (i.e. *Word Master* and *Culture Connector*) balance to the reading circle was maintained while global fluency practice was promoted.

Changes were also made to the instructions on the respective role sheets to emphasize content; thus details such as dates, facts or processes were highlighted particularly for the *Summarizer* and *Culture Connector* roles. Finally, I also introduced an additional role, *group representative* (but without role sheet), for the group discussion stage. This role is shared by the members of one circle as described in the section below.

## 5. Running the Content based Reading Circle

In order to set up the CBRC it is vital that students are guided and coached on the use of the role sheets in the first class session (i.e. week 1). The role sheets act as the framework and stimulus for discussion and are thus the key to helping students to get the most from their discussion. Without guidance for the role sheet, discussion can become one-dimensional (Evans, 1996) and reduce the efficacy of the fluency practice. At the same time it is important for students to know the other members in their circle, so groups of four should also be assigned (mixing male and female students if possible) in the first class session and students informed that these groups will be fixed for a five week cycle to allow each member to experience each role once (the fifth

week is for presentation). Students are then given the first non-fiction text for homework and complete their respective role sheet as instructed.

In subsequent weeks (i.e. weeks 2-5), instructors should spend 10 minutes at the beginning of class to introduce or contextualize the topic but without summarizing or commenting on the text itself as this might prejudice students' critical or independent thinking. After this introduction, students should begin their circle discussion led by the *Discussion Leader* with the instructor designating a specific amount of time. At first, a suitable time limit may be 20 minutes (depending on ability), but as students become more familiar with the role sheets and the other members they are working with in the CBRC talk time will increase, often, to as much 40 or 50 minutes. Generally, a discussion time limit of 30 minutes, with flexibility to allow for varying levels of student engagement depending on the text, is ideal.

Once the allotted time is complete, I call on the *group representative* from each group to stand up in front of the whole class for two or three minutes and highlight one aspect of the discussion of their group of four. Other groups are then free to ask questions to that representative or group. This allows students to be selective and encourages negotiation over the most important discussion point. Finally, the class closes with a teacher centered session which advises students on good (and poor) use of language. This is also a good opportunity for instructors to flag up any cultural or factual (mis)interpretations that respective groups may have made during their discussions. At the end of the session students are given a new text and prepare a different role for the following class. This is repeated over four consecutive weeks with different texts and with students taking different roles. In this way each member in the group can carry out each role over the 4 week period.

As a means of evaluating students, role sheets are collected in the fourth week and, in the fifth week of the cycle students prepare a short presentation or poster about one of the topics discussed in the previous four weeks and present it in a colloquium style forum. To raise student interest and promote critical thinking students are encouraged to develop their own interests on the broader themes discussed in class. Thus for a class based on the general topic 'European tourism', students might give presentations on topics as diverse as *Tourism in Spain*, *EasyJet*, or *Traditional German festivals*. The key is to give students the opportunity to pursue something of personal interest. Such presentations can also be used a means to assess students. The cycle of five weeks can be repeated in three rounds in a typical college semester. The week by week CBRC schedule describing student and teacher tasks is displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Scheduling a 15 week semester using the Content based reading circle.**

	<b>Student tasks</b>	<b>Teacher tasks</b>
Week 1: <b>Setting up the Content based reading circle</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign roles in groups.</li> <li>• Read first article as homework.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand out, read through and explain role sheets.</li> <li>• Assign students to groups of four.</li> <li>• Hand out first reading text.</li> </ul>
Weeks 2-5: <b>The content based reading circle</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Group Leader, Summarizer, Word Master, Culture Connector</i> discuss text using role sheets.</li> <li>• Groups designate a <i>representative</i> to give short talk (2-3 mins).</li> <li>• Ask questions to other groups, open class.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set background /context to content.</li> <li>• Set time limit for discussion.</li> <li>• Monitor, assist groups; take notes. Hand out new text.</li> <li>• Wrap up includes problems with language/content in groups; quiz or mini lecture.</li> </ul>
Week 6: <b>Presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students deliver a short (5 mins) presentation in a colloquium-type forum.</li> <li>• Peer evaluation.</li> <li>• Hand in role sheets.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mark and evaluate presentation for style, and content.</li> <li>• Use presentation script and role sheets for evaluation.</li> </ul>
Weeks 7-15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeat the week 2-6 cycle twice.</li> <li>• Students in new groups for each cycle.</li> </ul>	

## 6. Conclusion

Furr (2007) describes fiction based literature circles as working “magic” (p.18). With the possible caveat of students having minor personal differences in character with other members of their group (which occur in *any* classroom), the experiences I’ve have had with CBRC fully concur with this view. Students develop a new depth of understanding of content, hone critical thinking skills and, thanks to the group format class cohesion and overall co-operation benefit enormously. CBRC also encourage students to develop their own interests and provide a means to assessment without the need to resort to the memorization of pointless facts. With clearly defined tasks at its heart the CBRC creates a new learning milieu for L2 learners that is engaging and effective in helping to make content-based studies enjoyable, relevant and practical in the classroom and in students’ lives beyond it.

## 7. References

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## Abstract

Literature circles are a student focused, task based learning approach (TBL), that until recently had been used predominantly as a tool for first language acquisition. In giving the responsibility to students and, by making language input extensive rather than intensive, literature circles can also offer L2 instructors a valuable new tool to help raise outcomes where fluency is the goal. After describing the literature circle model for language learners (see, Furr 2007), its inherent strengths and possible drawbacks, an adaptation for use in content instruction is made. Finally, by highlighting the practical integration of this adaptation into a 15-week university semester a new learning milieu (the content based reading circle) is described.

