Reading Circles in the English Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract

In this paper, I will give an overview of reading circles (RC) and explain how reading circles are situated in the English language teaching literature. I will then describe two examples of how RCs have been implemented in my English language learning classes at the University of Tsukuba. Finally, I will suggest some areas for further research.

Introduction

Since the 1980s the government of Japan has made efforts to promote the development of more communicative English skills, in order to produce workers that can interact effectively in a global community. In 2014, The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology launched the Top Global Project in order to support universities working toward internationalisation of Japan's education system (MEXT n.d) The University of Tsukuba was one of the universities chosen to participate in the project.

Yet, despite a great deal of discussion about reform, progress is slow. Even now, Japanese students rarely have opportunities to use English as an academic endeavour (Graham-Marr 2015). Therefore, there is a need to teach English more communicatively. In this paper, I will attempt to show that reading circles can be an effective way to teach English reading communicatively. I will do this by first giving an overview of reading circles and situating them in the English language teaching literature. Then I will show how reading circles have been implemented in two courses I teach at the University of Tsukuba. Finally, I will suggest some areas for further research.

An overview of reading circles

In the 1990s, Harvey Daniels, a teacher in Chicago, and 19 colleagues decided to document their use of small peer led reading discussion groups, called Literature Circles, which they had introduced in to their classes in order to develop their students' higher order thinking skills, and encourage life-long reading. The following key elements of Literature Circles were stated:

1. Students choose their own materials.
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based on book choice.

3. Different groups read different books.
4. When books are finished, readers share with their class- mates, and then form new groups around new reading
5. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
6. Students use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and their discussion.
7. Discussion topics come from the students.
8. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions and open-ended questions are welcome.
9. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor.
10. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self- evaluation.
11. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.

Daniels (2002, p.18)

Furr (2004) adapted Literature Circles for the English language classroom, modifying the first 4 key elements of Daniels' model to better suit the EFL classroom:

1. Instructors select materials appropriate for their student population.
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion.
3. Different groups are usually reading the same text.
4. When books are finished, readers may prepare a group project and/or the Instructor may provide additional information to "fill in some of the gaps" in student understanding. After the group projects or additional instruction, new groups are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion

As more and more EFL teachers adopted reading circles, further modifications were made. Seburn (2015), for example, promotes the use of non-fiction texts for learners in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. Schoonmaker (2014. p.3) advocates a blended approach, because it "allows for additional communication in a virtual setting outside of class…"

While teachers have made adjustments to the key elements of reading circles, the use of roles is a constant. Each member of the reading discussion group has a role, which gives each group member "a clearly designed reason for reading" (Shelton-Strong 2012, p.214). Students prepare their roles before class, using worksheets provided by the teacher, or drawings and notes they have made themselves (Daniels 2002). Each role "lays the foundation for construction of

knowledge about the text" (Seburn 2015, p. 24). The reading groups discuss texts in a series of cycles. After each cycle the students change roles. Ideally, the students take on every role, at least once. Daniels (2002), Furr (2011), Shelton-Strong (2012), and Maher (2015), among others, have suggested a wide variety of roles. Discussion leader, Summariser, and Word Master (or Vocabulary Wizard) are some of the more common roles. Another common role is Connector. In this role, students make connections between the text that they have read and their own lives, or another text that they have read. According to Maher (2015), reading circles closely resemble Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) model because with each role, the members of the group are challenged to discuss and examine the text more deeply, and collaboratively come to understand it together.

Due to their interactive nature, reading circles fit into a social constructivist theory of learning. According to Schunk (2012), a fundamental assumption of social constructivism is that, "…teachers should structure situations such that learners become actively involved with content through manipulation of materials and social interaction." That is precisely what teachers do when they set up reading circles in their reading classes. For readers who want more information on social constructivism, Palinesar (1998) provides a good summary of social constructivist learning theory.

Reading circles also share characteristics of Communicative Language Teaching, and Task-based Language Teaching (Shelton-Strong 2011). Some research supports the idea that reading circles are effective for vocabulary development and language acquisition (Graham-Marr 2015, Maher 2013a, Maher 2013b).

In the next section, I will describe how I have used reading circles to teach two courses at the University of Tsukuba.

Academic reading circles in two courses at the University of Tsukuba

Since 2012, I have taught a course currently known as English Integrated Skills to first year students. The students major in a variety of disciplines in the humanities, arts, and sciences. Their English proficiency is quite broad as well, ranging from about 425 to 575 on the TOEFL ITP, or CEFR levels A2 to B2. The text I use for the course is Fiction in Action: Whodunit by Adam Gray and Marcos Benevides (2010). The text consists of two short detective stories, and is written for intermediate EFL students. Each chapter contains approximately 2000 words (Graham-Marr 2015).

Before each class, the students read a chapter and prepare to discuss the chapter with the members of their group. The students choose their own groups, and they remain in the same group for the entire course. The textbook

comes with a "detective's notebook" and the students' roles are based on the sections of the notebook. There is a Word Tracker, a Profiler, a Fact Finder, and a Chief Detective. The Chief Detective is mainly responsible for leading the group discussion of the chapter under review, including checking the answers to vocabulary and comprehension questions at the end of each chapter, and prompting the other members of the group to give their respective reports. The Word Tracker looks up key vocabulary, and writes out definitions in English, which he or she will then share with the other members of the group in class. The Profiler makes notes on the characters in the chapter, and the Fact Finder makes notes about important facts, clues, and evidence that emerge in each chapter. For a detailed description of each role please see Appendix B.

At the beginning of each class, students study key vocabulary using an online vocabulary flashcard application called Quizlet. Following this, the students get into their groups and discuss the chapter they read before class, and prepare for a quiz, which is directly related to the content of the chapter. Each group goes at its own pace. Groups that finish quickly go back to Quizlet and study the vocabulary until the other groups are done. Following the group discussions, the students do a quiz using a learning management system called manaba. A complete description of the class procedure is in Appendix A. The students follow this routine every class. As Graham-Marr (2015, p. 193) notes, "…students need to become familiar with their roles…A structured and predictable format helps students to understand what is expected of them." Once a chapter has been completed, the students change roles. There are six chapters, so each student gets an opportunity to fulfil each role at least once.

Students below CEFR B2 level cannot be expected to handle academic tasks on their own. They need support in order to effectively do group discussion (Graham-Marr & Pellowe 2016). For this reason I have made a document that lists a series of phrases to support the group discussions (see Appendix D). While the discussion can be mechanical, before I gave the students this discussion aide, their discussions were frequently in Japanese, and they went off task more often as well. Once they get used to the routine, even the students at the A2 level can manage the reading and the discussion.

Following Daniels (2002), Furr (2011), and Maher (2015), I act as a facilitator during the group discussions. I move from group to group, watching and listening. If a student is quiet, I may ask them a question directly, to get them talking. Also, students use me as a resource when they are unable to work out the meaning of a word, or passage in the story. I serve as a cultural resource as well.

I also teach the English Integrated Skills course to a special group of international students. The students in this class come from all over the world, and their English proficiency is generally higher than the English proficiency of the average student at the University of Tsukuba. These students are generally at the CEFR B2 to C1 levels. Since they are more capable, I allow them more

autonomy than my lower proficiency students. Students in this class choose their own short stories, which they can obtain free of charge from Project Gutenberg. For this class, we use the roles suggested in Seburn (2015): Leader, Contextualiser, Visualiser, Connector, and Highlighter. For detailed descriptions of these roles and their duties before, during and after class please see Appendix C. We do reading circles in five seventy-minute classes, so each student can do each role once. Students make their own groups and stay together for the entire semester. Students create a Google document that they use to plan and prepare their class discussions. They also make notes on the Google document during and after each class.

Suggestions for further research

As noted above, some research on reading circles has been done. Graham-Marr (2015) conducted a pilot study that investigated student opinion about the effectiveness of using Literature Circles for learning vocabulary, and culture. Graham-Marr and Pellowe (2016) looked into student opinions about the difficulty and value of the roles in Literature Circles. Interestingly, their students reported that the Summariser was the most difficult, but most valuable role. Schoonmaker (2013) investigated the benefits of a blended learning approach to reading circles. Replication of these studies with different student populations would be of benefit. Also, investigations of reading fluency, and reading skill development would be useful. Another possible area for research would be an investigation of learner discussion skills. Do reading circles help students improve these skills?

Conclusion

Reading circles are an adaptable and effective way to teach reading to English language learners. They encourage students to look at a text from different angles. Through discussion, students can help each other work out the meaning of texts, even texts slightly above their reading ability. Students find them enjoyable too. More research, especially classroom-based research and action research needs to be done to help teachers know how to best adapt reading circles for their unique learning communities.

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Appendix A

E3: English Integrated Skills Basic Class Routine

1. Come to the classroom 5 minutes before the class begins
2. Login to the computer, sign into manaba, submit your attendance card
3. Sign into Quizlet. Study the vocabulary flashcards for the chapter you will be discussing, for 10 minutes
4. In your groups, discuss that week's chapter and prepare for the quiz. The Chief Detective leads the discussion. You can work at your own pace. You will have 15 minutes to finish your discussion. Follow these steps:
   a. **Puzzle:** Check the answers to the vocabulary and comprehension questions at the end of the chapter and solve the puzzle together.
   b. **Chapter Tasks:** the group discusses the tasks in that week's chapter. For example, the chart on page 11 of *Whodunit*.
   c. **Word Tracker Report:** the Word Tracker tells the other members of the group about the key vocabulary in that week's chapter. The other members of the group **listen** carefully and write notes on pages 3 and 4 of their Detective's Notebook. When you have filled both pages, you can insert loose leaf paper. Be sure to take notes about all the vocabulary in the puzzle. **This vocabulary will be on the quiz.**
   d. **Profiler Report:** the Profiler tells the group about the important

characters in the story, especially the suspects. The other members of the group **listen** and write notes on the Persons of Interest page of the Detective's Notebook. Be sure to take notes about **motives, alibis, and suspicions.**

    e. **Fact Finder Report:** the Fact Finder tells the group about any **facts and clues** that are important. The other members of the group **listen** and make notes on the Just the Facts page of the Detective's Notebook. Be sure to pay attention to the **fingerprints** in the chapter.

    f. **Chapter Review:** Do the chapter review task at the end of the chapter.

5. Listening: the whole class will do the listening task at the end of the chapter.

6. Quiz: You will have 15 minutes to do the quiz. If you finish early you should study the next chapter's flashcards on Quizlet.

Appendix B

English Integrated Skills I&II Reading Circle Roles

Chief Detective

The Chief Detective is the discussion leader. The Chief Detective's job is to make sure that all members of the group are participating. The Chief Detective must also remind the members of the group to use English as much as possible. The Chief Detective should **NEVER** be absent from class. Group members should contact the Chief Detective **before** class, if they are going to be absent.

Word Tracker

The Word Tracker is responsible for looking up all the important vocabulary in the chapter. The Word Tracker must write down new words and expressions on pages 3 and 4 of the Detective's Notebook. The Word Tracker looks up and writes down the important vocabulary as homework. The Word Tracker **must not fail to do this homework**, because the other group members need the vocabulary notes for the weekly quiz. The Word tracker will tell the other group members about the new vocabulary during the class discussion.

Profiler

The Profiler's job is to make notes about the persons of interest in the story. The persons of interest are the important characters in the story, including the suspects. The Profiler writes their notes on the Persons of Interest page (pp.6 & 11) in the Detective's Notebook. The

Profiler makes these notes as homework. The Profiler **must not fail to do this homework,** because the other group members need the persons of interest notes for the weekly quiz. The Profiler will tell the other group members about the persons of interest during the class discussion.

Fact Finder

The Fact Finder's job is to make notes about the facts and evidence in each chapter of the story. The Fact finder makes notes on the Just the Facts page of the Detective's Notebook (pp. 7, 8 & 12 &13). The Fact Finder makes these notes for homework. The Fact Finder **must not fail to do this homework,** because the other group members need the Just the Facts notes for the weekly quiz. The Profiler will tell the other group members about the new facts and evidence during the class discussion.

Appendix C

English Integrated Skills II (G30 Class) Reading Circle Roles

Leader

Before the class meeting
- record the name of the short novel or short story collection, that the group has agreed to read, on the group's Reading Circles Google Document. The citation must be done in APA style.
- prepare a summary of the chapter, or short story.
- prepare 6 discussion questions
- prepare an agenda for the group discussions in class

During Group Discussion in class
- Present the summary to the group
- Elicit questions, requests for clarification, and comments about the summary
- Present the discussion questions and lead all the group members in answering the questions.
- Introduce each role in turn, keeping track of time, and ensuring that more time is spent on discussion rather than on presentation.
- End the discussion by assigning the roles for next class.

Contextualiser

Before the class meeting
- Find contextual references (people, places, events) used by the author in the text.
- Identify the contextual references that are important. Eliminate contextual references that are explained in the text, or are easily

understood.
- Research 3 or more contextual references and present them to the group.
- Record key points about the contextual references you researched on the group Google document.

During Group Discussion in class
- lead group discussion of the contextual references presented. Try to discover how they help deep understanding of the text.

Visualiser

Before the class meeting
- Create or find two different types of visuals related to the text. Eg. mind maps, timelines, photos, satirical cartoons, charts, graphs for infographics (for statistics)
- Post the visuals and the citations of the sources on the group Google document.

During Group Discussion in class
- Lead the group in a discussion of how the visuals help understanding of the text.

Connector

Before the class meeting
- Consider ways in which this story connects to other stories you have read (eg. The Sign of Four), other courses you are taking now, or have taken in the past, familiar events, or personal experiences.
- Choose 2 connections from the types listed above and think about how those connections help you understand the text.
- Post the key points about your connections on the group Google document.

During Group Discussion in class
- Lead the group in a discussion of how the connections help understanding of the text.

Highlighter

Before the class meeting
- Highlight 5 unknown key vocabulary in the text. These should be words that are frequently repeated in the text, and words that are clearly important to the story. Look up the words in a dictionary.
- Post the words, definitions and an example sentence from the text. Note the page and the paragraph number in the text.

- Highlight 5 tonal words. In other words, vocabulary that reveals the author's point of view. Post these words and example sentences on the Google document. Write an explanation of how you think these words reveal the author's point of view.

During Group Discussion in class
- Lead the group in a discussion of how the highlighted words help understanding of the text.

Follow-up for all roles
- Write a reflection on the group Google document about being visualiser. Reflect on the things that you enjoyed about being visualiser, the things that you didn't enjoy, or found challenging, and give advice to the next visualiser.

Appendix D

English Integrated Skills: Useful Phrases for Group Discussion
Checking the Puzzle

Chief Detective

OK, let's start. _____ please tell us the answer to question 1.
Thank you. _____ please tell us the answer to question 2…
Please tell us the answer to the puzzle.

Other group members
The answer is _____.

Checking Vocabulary

Chief Detective
OK, who was the Word Finder? Please tell us the key vocabulary for this chapter.

Word Finder
OK, the first word is _____. _____ is a (noun/verb/adverb/adjective…). _____ means_____.
Next…

Other group members
How do you spell that?
Could you say that again please?
How do you say that in Japanese?

Discussing Persons of Interest

Chief Detective
OK, who was the Profiler_____? Please tell us about the persons
  of interest.

Profiler
OK, first, _____ is _____.
 _____'s alibi is_____.
 _____'s motive is _____.
 _____ is suspicious because_____.

Discussing important facts of the case

Chief Detective
OK, who was the Fact Finder? _____, please tell us the import
  facts, and clues in this chapter.

Fact Finder

OK, first…. Next… After that… Finally.