STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF INTEGRATED-SKILLS LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Abstract

This paper examines EFL students' perceptions of the benefits of taking part in integrated-skills language learning activities, ones that require them to use multiple language abilities. In particular, these activities involved reading circles, discussion groups that met regularly to share ideas and information about different aspects of a text each member of the group had read. Reading circle activities provide opportunities for language input and output, as well as collaborative interaction. SLA research indicates that these features are all of primary importance to language development. However, do students recognize the benefits of participating in these integrated-skills activities? The results of a student survey of two university EFL classes in Japan that used reading circles for one school year suggest that a great majority of these students believed that all of the reading circle activities were useful for their English language learning. The students felt that taking part in various activities concerning what they had read helped them both to better understand what they had read and to perform better in their discussions about what they had read. They also believed that practicing multiple language skills was more beneficial than practicing only one skill at a time in order to improve both their receptive and their productive abilities.

1. Input, Output, and Interaction

The importance of including input, output, and interaction activities for students to be successful at learning a second language in the classroom has been well supported by recent research (Bresnihan & MacAuley, 2014; Ellis, 2005; Gass & Mackey, 2006; Lessard-Clouston, 2007; Wang & Castro, 2010). The most beneficial language learning classes, therefore, need to provide plenty of target language input, chances to produce the target language, and opportunities to communicate with others in the target language. They need to integrate the students' use of multiple language abilities.

It is clear that repeated contact with large amounts of varied input is necessary for language learning to take place (Ellis, 2005; Gass, 1997; Maley, 2009). Krashen (1985), in particular, emphasizes the importance of input in the language learning process. In fact, in Krashen's view, speaking and writing are not important for language acquisition to take place, and learners will be able to learn a language without these components as long as there is sufficient comprehensible input. "More writing," he claims, "does not result in better writing," and "More speaking does not result in better speaking" (Wang, 2013, p. 26). In this language learning model, the language classroom should provide interesting and comprehensible input in a relaxed atmosphere; learners do not have to speak and when they do, there should be little or no error correction.

Swain (1985), however, points out that both comprehensible input and pushed output are necessary for language learners to develop not only communicative competence but also accurate language usage. Drawing on Swain's research, Skehan (1998, p. 16-18) outlines the benefits of having opportunities to actually produce the language.

1. Learners can use output to provide feedback, which should result in subsequent input from an interlocutor being more appropriate to the level of the learner.
2. Learners will be forced to pay attention to the syntax of the language they listen to if they know that they will be required to respond.
3. Learners will be forced to test out their language assumptions.
4. Learners will develop automaticity.
5. Learners will be able to work towards better discourse skills.
6. Learners will develop a personal manner of speaking.

In order to provide students with the kinds of opportunities for sustained output necessary for language development, Ellis (2005) maintains that learners should be asked to perform tasks in which extended conversation takes place and in which the learners are stretched to express messages "clearly and explicitly" (p. 40). According to Ellis (2005), this is best achieved with tasks that require both written and spoken output. The teacher should therefore set tasks which require students to produce written and spoken output that encourages them to pay attention to the forms of the language they are using and to test out ways of getting their messages across.

Building on the idea that both input and output are important to language acquisition, the Interaction Hypothesis draws attention to the fact that both input and output exist in spoken interaction. Thus, it is an integrated-skills activity. This hypothesis, as described by Gass and Mackey (2006), maintains that through spoken interaction, language learners notice the differences between the ways they use the language and the ways it is used by their conversation partners. Moreover, when there are communication problems, negotiation for meaning will often take place. The resulting modifications help to make the input more comprehensible, result in corrective feedback, and encourage the learners to modify their own output. In this way, spoken interaction not only provides opportunities for learners to improve their fluency, it also provides more comprehensible input and allows learners to test using combinations of words and phrases in ways that are new to them. Ellis (2005) points out that one way for teachers to provide opportunities for the kinds of interactions that will lead to target language acquisition in the classroom is through the introduction of small group work. Allowing students to interact freely in small groups without teacher intervention, he says, is more likely to result in "acquisition-rich discourse" (Ellis, 2005, p. 41).

2. Reading Circles

Reading circles help to create situations in which many of the favorable conditions for language acquisition described above exist. Target language input is abundant. Output and interaction in the target language are required. Use of all language skills in integrated ways is required. Communication in the target language is carried out freely and collaboratively by the learners in small groups.

Reading circles, which are basically small groups of people meeting at regular intervals to discuss something they have read, have existed for many years outside the world of academia. However, they are now frequently used in all levels of education and are starting to make an appearance in the EFL classroom. Furr (2007, p. 16) describes eight features that reading circles for EFL students will likely contain.

1. The reading material is at an appropriate level for the students and is selected by the teacher.
2. Students are organized into small groups in the classroom.
3. All of the groups read the same text.

4. Groups meet regularly to share their ideas and interpretations of the text.

5. Students are assigned roles, which focus each group member's reading of the text and later presentation to the group from a different perspective.

6. The students decide what topics to discuss.

7. Discussions are natural conversations about the text.

8. Discussions activities are student centered, and the teacher's role is that of a facilitator.

Reading circles provide a structure that enables EFL learners to have engaging, student-led group discussions (Furr, 2007). Clear instructions, explaining what is expected of students in each role, together with an example of a completed role sheet, can also be provided. (See Furr, 2009 for examples of role sheets.) This kind of support can be especially helpful in the EFL classroom as students may have little experience in taking part in group discussions in English.

One leading exponent of the use of reading circles in the classroom, Daniels (2002), claims that reading circles "are a part—a quite sophisticated and highly evolved part—of the wider collaborative learning movement" and display the "characteristic features of true collaboration: student initiated inquiry, choice, self direction, mutual interdependence, face-to-face interaction, and self and group assessment" (p. 35). Research indicates that students achieve more and find their classes more enjoyable and satisfying when they work in collaborative learning environments than when they work alone (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001; Slavin, 1989).

Reading circles also appear to motivate students to develop the habits of extensive reading (Daniels, 2002; Davis, Resta, Davis, & Camacho, 2001; Furr, 2007), and studies show that participation in reading circle activities leads to increased reading performance (Daniels, 2002; Davis, Resta, Davis, & Camacho, 2001). For students living in countries where there are few chances to communicate with speakers of the target language, reading is one of the most available ways of getting exposure to comprehensible input, and EFL students who read extensively outside the classroom will be exposed to far more input than would be possible during limited class time (Maley, 2009).

Publications and research concerning the use of reading circles in the classroom has been increasing greatly. However, it is difficult to grasp the overall picture that is

emerging. This is partly because reading circles are also called by other names, such as literature circles, book clubs, and literature discussion groups. Yet, as Daniels (2002) explains, evidence of the positive benefits of using reading circles in the classroom is building up, and the number of teachers who strongly support the use of reading circles in the classroom is increasing quickly.

3. EFL Students and Reading Circles

On the other hand, EFL students' perceptions of engaging in reading circle activities have not yet been extensively studied. The data that is available, however, seems to be very favorable. A survey carried out in a university in Taiwan on a group of EFL students, as well as on a group of students studying Japanese as a foreign language, recorded very positive attitudes from the students about the use of reading circles in class (Sai & Hsu, 2007). Similar findings appeared in a survey conducted in a Japanese university on EFL students, who were using reading circles as part of their content-based course on British culture (Williams, 2011). As well as indicating that the students had very positive reactions to the use of reading circles in class, the results showed that the students felt that the discussions helped them to better understand the reading material and also improved their critical thinking capacity and overall English language ability. Further evidence of favorable student responses towards the use of reading circles in the EFL context in Japan was found by MacAuley and Nevara (2015) in a survey carried out on a university class that had been using reading circles in lessons for almost a year. The results in this survey showed clearly that the students felt that reading circles made the class more relaxing and more enjoyable and created a positive learning environment. The students also strongly indicated that they felt that the discussions helped them to improve their understanding of the reading material.

However, because of the limited scope of the questions relating to the development of specific language skills in previous surveys, further research into the details of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of reading circles in promoting language development in the EFL classroom is needed. The present study is intended to further this inquiry.

4. How to Discover What the Students' Thought

Basically, we were interested to find out if the students thought that their

experiences carrying out reading circle activities, as one example of an integrated, collaborative, interactive approach to language learning, helped them to improve their English abilities. Our specific research questions were:

1. Did the students think that each of the reading circle activities helped them to improve their English language abilities?

2. Did the students think that their comprehension of the reading material was helped by taking part in activities involving other language skills?

3. Did the students think that their performance in the discussions of the reading material was helped by taking part in activities involving other language skills?

4. Which did the students think helped them most to develop their receptive abilities: practice in a single language skill or in a combination of language skills?

5. Which did the students think helped them the most to develop their productive abilities: practice in a single language skill or in a combination of language skills?

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of sophomores studying at Japanese universities. The English language abilities of most of these students would be considered intermediate to upper intermediate in Japan, with none being beginners. The students in class A were majoring in English and attending a public city university of foreign studies. The students in class B were attending a public prefectural university and majoring in one of the social sciences. The students were assigned to class A, a required course, while the students in class B had selected this particular section of a mandatory course. Both courses were taught by the same native English speaker.

Each class was held once a week in a 15-week, two-semester system. When the questionnaire was administered, reading circle activities had been conducted in half of the class A lessons and in five eighths of the class B lessons. The students in both classes had read and worked with the same non-fiction book for native speakers of English, and those in class B had additionally read and worked with some short stories from a graded reader. When the next class was to be conducted using reading circle activities, the students first read the assigned pages for homework. Then, they each wrote something in their notebooks based on their roles. Basically, each reading circle was made up of four students, each student having a different role, as per Appendix A. In class, the students were given about one hour to complete the activities. After each

lesson using reading circle activities, they rotated roles, and they changed groups after every fourth reading circle lesson.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was responded to anonymously, and took about ten minutes for the students to complete. Of the 30 students in class A, 28 filled it out in the ninth lesson of the second semester. All 12 of the class B students answered the questionnaire in the tenth lesson of the second semester. In all of the tables, which present the collated responses to the questionnaire, the percentages may not equal to 100 due to rounding.

5. Students' Perceptions of the Various Activities

It seems clear from the data collected that these students believed that the reading circle activities were helpful in their efforts to improve their English abilities. Moreover, the students' responses strongly indicate that the students felt that activities focusing on each of the language skills also benefited their performance in the other skills, as well.

1. Did the students think that each of the reading circle activities helped them to improve their English language abilities?

Table 1
The perceived usefulness of each reading circle activity

	Reading		Writing		Presenting		Listening		Discussing	
Class	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
A	100%	0%	82%	18%	100%	0%	89%	11%	96%	4%
B	100%	0%	75%	25%	100%	0%	92%	8%	100%	0%

Class A: n=28. Class B: n=12.

In Table 1, Reading means reading the text for homework; Writing means writing for homework what was required for the student's role that week; Presenting means presenting orally in the reading circle group what was required for the student's role; Listening means listening to what other students present orally in the reading circle group; and Discussing means discussing further what is presented in the reading circle group. We see that the great majority of the students in both classes thought that each

of the reading circle activities was useful for assisting them in their English language learning: 100% for reading the text and presenting material about the text and almost 100% for discussing the text, with one student in class A disagreeing; 89% and 92% of the class A and B students, respectively, for listening to others present material about the text; and 82% and 75% of the class A and B students, respectively, for writing about the text in preparation for presenting. The answer to the first question is definitely yes.

2. Did the students think that their comprehension of the reading material was helped by taking part in activities involving other language skills?

Table 2
Having discussions helped me to understand what I had read

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	18	64%	8	29%	2	7%	0	0%
B n=12	9	75%	3	25%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 3
Writing helped me to understand what I had read

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	13	46%	12	43%	3	11%	0	0%
B n=12	2	17%	7	58%	3	25%	0	0%

The rankings in tables 2 to 7 are 1 (I agree strongly), 2 (I agree), 3 (Maybe), and 4 (I do not agree). Table 2 shows us that 93% (64%+29%) of the students in class A and 100% (75%+25%) of the students in class B were certain that having discussions helped them to understand the text they had read. In Table 3, we find that 89% (46%+43%) of the class A students and 75% (17%+58%) of the class B students felt sure that writing in preparation for presenting allowed them to better understand what they had read. No students thought that these were definitely untrue. Therefore, the answer to the second question, about whether these students thought that their reading comprehension was enhanced by taking part in activities involving other skills and related to the same content, as was required by the design of the reading circles, is yes.

3. Did the students think that their performance in the discussions of the reading material was helped by taking part in activities involving other language skills?

Table 4
Reading something before talking helped me to say more in discussions

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	18	64%	6	21%	4	14%	0	0%
B n=12	5	42%	7	58%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 5
Writing something before talking helped me to say more in discussions

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	14	50%	11	39%	3	11%	0	0%
B n=12	4	33%	4	33%	4	33%	0	0%

Table 6
Reading something before listening helped me to understand more in discussions

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	19	68%	8	29%	1	4%	0	0%
B n=12	7	58%	3	25%	2	17%	0	0%

Table 7
Writing something before listening helped me to understand more in discussions

Class	Rank 1		Rank 2		Rank 3		Rank 4	
A n=28	11	39%	10	36%	7	25%	0	0%
B n=12	0	0%	6	50%	5	42%	1	8%

In Table 4, we see that 85% (64%+21%) and 100% (42%+58%) of the students in classes A and B, respectively, believed that reading the text before talking enabled them to say more in their discussions. Also, Table 5 shows us that 89% (50%+39%) and 66% (33%+33%) of the students in classes A and B, respectively, thought that writing down what was required for their role helped them to say more in the discussions. Again, no students responded that they felt either reading or writing certainly did not help them

to speak more during their discussions. Table 6 tells us that 97% (68%+29%) of the class A students and 83% (58%+25%) of the class B students thought that reading the text before listening to their classmates speak about it help them to understand what their classmates said; and no students felt this to certainly be false. And, in Table 7 we see that 75% (39%+36%) of the class A students and 50% (0%+50%) of the class B students believed that writing what their role required helped them to better understand what their classmates said; with no students in class A and one student in class B feeling that this was surely not true. Overall, the results displayed in these four tables show strong support for answering question three with yes, these students thought that their performance and comprehension in the discussions of the reading was better than it might have been because they took part in activities involving other skills based on that same content, as was necessary in the reading circles. The somewhat weaker support for this hypothesis displayed in Table 7 may be due to the fact that the students within each group wrote about quite different things, and so they may not have felt their writing definitely made it easier for them to understand what their classmates said.

4. Which did the students think helped them most to develop their receptive abilities: practice in a single language skill or in a combination of language skills?

In tables 8 to 11, the single skills are reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking, and the combinations of skills are reading and writing, reading and listening, reading and speaking, writing and listening, writing and speaking, having discussions, reading and writing and listening, reading and writing and speaking, reading and having discussions, writing and having discussions, and/or reading and writing and having discussions. Table 8 tells us that 86% of class A students and 100% of class B students thought that a combination of activities practicing various skills helped them more to develop their reading abilities than only engaging in a single-skill language learning activity. Table 9 shows that 89% and 100% of the class A and B students, respectively, thought that it was more beneficial for them to take part in a variety of language learning activities practicing different skills rather than practicing only one skill to improve their listening abilities. Therefore, these students overwhelmingly felt that participating in various activities, which allowed them to practice different skills, based on the same content and required by the different reading circle tasks, helped them more to develop their

receptive abilities than practicing only a single skill; and the answer to the fourth question is clearly yes.

Table 8
Individual skill versus combination of skills to become better at reading

Class	Single	Combination
A n=28	4 14%	24 86%
B n=12	0 0%	12 100%

Table 9
Individual skill versus combination of skills to become better at listening

Class	Single	Combination
A n=28	3 11%	25 89%
B n=12	0 0%	12 100%

5.   Which did the students think helped them the most to develop their productive abilities: practice in a single language skill or in a combination of language skills?

Table 10
Individual skill versus combination of skills to become better at speaking

Class	Single	Combination
A n=28	4 14%	14 86%
B n=12	1 8%	11 92%

Table 11
Individual skill versus combination of skills to become better at writing

Class	Single	Combination
A n=28	3 11%	25 89%
B n=12	0 0%	12 100%

In Table 10, we find that 86% and 92% of the class A and B students, respectively, believed that participating in activities that required them to practice various skills was more helpful for them to become better at speaking than practicing only one skill. Also,

Table 11 shows us that 89% and 100% of class A and B students, respectively, felt that engaging in various activities using different skills, rather than practicing only one skill, was more useful for them to improve their writing. So, we see that a very good majority of these students thought that a combination of various skill-based activities concerning the same content, as was required by the reading circles' framework, benefited them more in developing their productive abilities than practice in only one skill; and so the answer to the fifth question is also a strong yes.

6. Conclusion

Most Japanese universities separate their language classes by skills. A specific method of translation, called yakudoku, in which written English is translated into good written Japanese for comprehension in Japanese, dominates much of the teaching in high schools and universities carried out by Japanese English teachers (Bamford, 1993; Gorsuch, 1998; Hino, 1988; King, 2013; Nakata, 2006; Nishino, 2008; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Smith, 2012). Listening texts normally come with transcriptions, and so can be taught in the same way. Therefore, this interactive and collaborative integrated-skills approach to language teaching and learning, the use of reading circles, emphasizing both input and output based on one content, which was examined here, was new for many of these students.

Our five research questions concerned whether or not these students regarded the various and integrated-skills reading circle activities as beneficial for the development of their individual English language abilities. The responses to the questionnaire indicate that these students overwhelmingly believed that they did. The students' responses demonstrated their belief that 1) all of the various reading circle activities helped them to improve their English language abilities, 2) their comprehension of what they read was helped by participating in activities involving other skills, 3) their speaking and their listening comprehension during discussions of what they read was helped by participating in activities involving other skills, 4) their involvement in a combination of various skill-based activities helped them more in developing their receptive and their productive abilities than practice in only a single skill. This suggests, even without quantitative measures of improvement, that such a method would be very useful for students' English language learning because perception of improvement often results in increasing one's motivation to study and learn.

To a very great extent, the results from this study support the use of integrated, collaborative, interactive approaches to teaching English as a foreign language that require students to practice all four skills based on the same content. The great majority of the students perceived all of the reading circle activities as beneficial for their English language learning in all but one case. (See Table 7, Class B.) Objective assessment of students' improvement in each of the language skills would be useful to find out if students' perceptions matched their actual progress.

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Appendix A: Reading Circle Roles

The Facilitator:

For Homework -- writes an overall summary of the main points, ideas, feelings, and events of the section that was read

In Class -- tells the group the summary orally without looking at what was written; encourages group members to comment on these points, ideas, and feelings; also, maintains the use of English by group members (reminds group members to speak in English, if they drift into Japanese) -- this person presents first

The Investigator:

For Homework -- identifies and writes down at least ten words or phrases that are unknown, interesting, or used in unusual ways, along with the pages they are on and the sentences they are in, and finds out and writes down their meanings; and identifies and writes down any unknown places, people, or events and finds out and writes down who or what they are

In Class -- reads one word or phrase (and the sentence it is in) or place, person, or event and gives an explanation of it; encourages group members to add or ask anything they wish; then repeats this for each item written -- this person presents second

The Quoter:

For Homework -- chooses and writes down at least three or four short passages (quotations) along with the pages they are on

In Class -- reads one quoted passage aloud twice and asks group members for their thoughts, opinions, and feelings about it; encourages group members to discuss the quotation; then repeats this for each quotation -- this person presents third

The Connector:

For Homework -- identifies and writes down at least three or four similarities and/ or differences with things in her/his country and/or Japan, along with the pages they are on; and identifies and connects three or four things with what is happening now or recently in Japan or the USA or elsewhere in the world and writes them down

In Class -- tells the group about one similarity or difference or connection orally

without looking at what was written; encourages group members to comment on these similarities, differences, and connections; then repeats this for each item written - this person presents last

Appendix B: The Questionnaire

In this class, you have been reading a book and then writing, speaking, and having discussions about it. Please answer the questions that are written below about these activities and your English abilities as carefully as possible.

For 1 to 6, rank each statement by circling only ONE answer.

   1 (I agree strongly)   2 (I agree)   3 (Maybe)   4 (I do not agree)

1. Writing helped me to understand what I had read.

     1   2   3   4

2. Reading something before talking helped me to say more when I had discussions.

     1   2   3   4

3. Writing something before talking helped me to say more when I had discussions.

     1   2   3   4

4. Reading something before listening helped me to understand more of what my classmates

  said in the discussions.

     1   2   3   4

5. Writing something before listening helped me to understand more of what my classmates

  said in the discussions.

     1   2   3   4

6. Having discussions helped me to understand what I had read.

     1   2   3   4

7. Which helped you MOST to become a better reader? Circle only ONE answer.

Reading / Writing / Listening / Speaking /

Reading and Writing / Reading and Listening / Reading and Speaking /

Writing and Listening / Writing and Speaking / Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Listening / Reading and Writing and Speaking /

Reading and Having discussions / Writing and Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Having discussions

8. Which helped you MOST to become a better listener? Circle only ONE answer.

Reading / Writing / Listening / Speaking /

Reading and Writing / Reading and Listening / Reading and Speaking /

Writing and Listening / Writing and Speaking / Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Listening / Reading and Writing and Speaking /

Reading and Having discussions / Writing and Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Having discussions

9. Which helped you MOST to become a better speaker? Circle only ONE answer.

Reading / Writing / Listening / Speaking /

Reading and Writing / Reading and Listening / Reading and Speaking /

Writing and Listening / Writing and Speaking / Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Listening / Reading and Writing and Speaking /

Reading and Having discussions / Writing and Having discussions /

Reading and Writing and Having discussions

10. Which helped you MOST to become a better writer? Circle <u>only ONE</u> answer.

    Reading　/　Writing　/　Listening　/　Speaking　/

  Reading and Writing　/　Reading and Listening　/　Reading and Speaking　/

    Writing and Listening　/　Writing and Speaking　/　Having discussions　/

  Reading and Writing and Listening　/　Reading and Writing and Speaking　/

    Reading and Having discussions　/　Writing and Having discussions　　/

  Reading and Writing and Having discussions

11. Which aspects of the classroom activities you did involving the textbook were beneficial to you for improving your English language abilities?　<u>Mark each of the following either O (helpful) or X (not helpful)</u>.

__ reading at home

__ writing at home (for your role)

__ talking in class (presenting your role's information)

__ listening to your classmates in class (presenting their roles' information)

__ discussing the topics (after or while each classmate presents for her/his role)