

# ENHANCING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH THROUGH ADAPTATION OF LITERATURE CIRCLES IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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## **Abstract**

Teaching students how to write in a foreign language can be a daunting task and at times seems unsurmountable. This pilot study focuses on a second year required course in English in a Japanese university in which an adapted version of the literature circle approach was implemented. The students formed temporary groups of 4s and shared ideas on how to write the integral parts of what constitutes academic essays, i.e., introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion, on pre-selected topics. The purpose of the study was to enhance the students' writing skills by exposing them to a variety of ideas generated by the different members of the groups as well as increasing class participation and productivity through task repetition. The conclusion of the study revealed a combination of both positive and unconvincing developments but suggests that with further adaptation this approach can potentially benefit students greatly in improving their writing.

## **Keywords**

Variety, literature circles, exposure, task repetition

## **Introduction**

Dimitriou (2007) argues that one of the challenges that students face in writing a good essay in a foreign language is not that they do not have the tools to write one, but that they have not written many essays yet. Students might spend much of their valuable time trying to generate ideas which they might eventually feel unsure about and later doubt the credibility of what they write. This raises the question of how to lead the students to be effective at generating and organizing ideas for their writing. Clearly a communicative approach whereby students think together and share ideas as well as multiple opportunities to practice might be the solution here and the answer can be found in the literature circle approach or at least an adapted version of it.

### **1.1 A brief overview of the literature approach –**

Daniels (1994) described literature circles or LC, as small temporary groups consisting of students who gather, based on their selection, to read the same text. Members of the groups are prescribed discussion roles and come to the discussion with notes pertaining to their roles which they prepared prior to the class. The purpose of this approach is to teach students to work together and to view each other as sources of information as they discuss and clarify information during a shared activity. Students bounce ideas off each other and get exposed to a wider range of words and expressions and as a result become actively engaged in the process because they are able to make their own choices which in turn makes the assignment more meaningful. Additionally, as Graham-Marr remarks in his paper (2015), "*having students do these sessions multiple times leads to improved performance*".

Graham-Marr also suggests that to be fully effective, rotation amongst the members of the groups should be applied to the session, “ *Repetition can be facilitated by changing the group membership so that each group has entirely new members with each cycle. Changing group membership also gives the activity some communicative purpose as fresh discussions can be had with the new members*” .

Considering the benefits and success of this approach and its popularity amongst L1 & L2 language acquisition researchers (Brock, 1997 ; Hancock, 2000 ; Hsu, 2003 ; lin,2006) who enthusiastically embraced this distinctive pedagogic method, one has to wonder whether it could be beneficial to an academic writing class. This study was therefore carried out as an experiment to find out whether this approach would be helpful for the students and what adaptations, if any, were needed. The study was conducted with the following questions in mind 1) what are the factors determining the success or failure of this approach in a writing class, 2) what is the perceived effectiveness of this approach. The findings of the study can be summarized as follows: 1) The factors contributing to the success of the approach included students’ preferences for group activity, sharing ideas, discussion about the topics and personalized teacher’s feedback 2) The students felt their vocabulary improved but reported not being sure if it was helpful when writing on their own.

## **2.0 Methodology-Participants, settings and procedures.**

### **The participants & the settings**

The participants in the study were second year engineering majors. Using the Common European Framework of Languages; Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR) as a guideline, the majority of the students in those classes can be said to have proficiency levels in writing in CEFR B1 to B2 range ( *see appendix A for more details* ). The official titles for the classes were simply “A English 3 Academic writing & B English 3, Academic writing” . The classes were elective, met weekly for 90 minutes and were designed with the aim of enhancing students’ academic writing skills. The study lasted 12 weeks and was conducted during the 1<sup>st</sup> academic term which runs from April till July in Japan. The LC approach was held every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> week of each month and was referred to as practice sessions. During the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> week the basics of academic writing were taught in order to help the students understand the mechanisms of academic writing, and were referred to as the comprehensive phases. None of the students had previously studied academic writing at the university.

### **2.1 The selection of the materials**

The same topics and assignments were chosen for both classes and the material was selected by the instructor who made sure that the writing tasks were appropriate to what the class studied. Although the textbooks were different in format, “improving your IELTS” for the B English 3 and “writing for IELTS” for the A English 3, the content was similar covering the basics of academic integrated and independent writing. Both textbooks contained a test practice page of the end of each unit with writing activities pertaining to the content of the unit. It is those writing activities which were used in the practice sessions. However, in order to enlarge the scope of the activities, the source materials for the

practice sessions were taken from the test practice pages of both textbooks for both classes.

## **2.2 The procedure**

### **The comprehensive phases**

Every 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> week the classes focused on how to write sections of academic essays. For example, when working on the independent task, the students learned the different constituents of an introduction, the hook, the scope, the thesis statement, hedging, how to paraphrase a question, the list is not exhaustive, and use the textbook as a support. These comprehensive phases were designed to promote a basic understanding of how essays were written in an academic setting. The instructor taught the students how to write the components chosen and the students worked individually or in pairs on the subset exercises in the textbook. This was followed by collective correction with the whole class. The students were then asked to use the points learned in their own writing and peer edit their work. Both classes received the same instruction during those comprehensive phases. For a detail summary of what was covered and what the students were assessed on, see appendix B.

### **The practice sessions**

Between the comprehensive phases and the practice sessions students were to review what was covered and were given subset skills exercises as homework. In order to make the study more credible and have something to compare it with, the method changed during the practise sessions which were held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> week of each month. While the A English 3 class took the LC approach the other class, the B English 3 class, took a more standard approach but still student-centered based mainly on pair-work and peer editing with no rotation in membership. The students, however, were ask to make new pairs at every practice session. At the end of the study the participants were given an in-class essay writing assignment to complete individually. The essays were marked and compared.

## **2.3 Adaptation to the literature circles approach**

Unlike Daniels (1994) who recommends assigning roles to each member of the groups, the members in this study had no prescribed roles and were free to comment and share their knowledge on any part of the discussion, vocabulary, grammar, ideas and so on. The objective was to maintain that all members serve as core roles in an ideal four people group in which everybody had a say at any stage of the process adding flexibility to the discussion as members negotiated to make their final choice. This promoted open-ended natural discussions about the task and after a consensus was reached the students composed their writing based on what they discussed. At this point it is good to quote Rosenbaltt (1995) who argues that natural discussion of a literary work and role rotation enable readers to approach a text from various perspectives. However, as pointed earlier, no roles were assigned in this study and it is through this adjustment that this study was based on. Through this adaptation, the students became their own decision makers because of the free choices they made and their personal knowledge and experience they brought to the negotiation process. Although no roles

were assigned, the students were given numbers in order to facilitate the rotation. The same or slightly altered tasks were repeated at intervals of 15/20 minutes and the members of the groups moved into a numerical rotation to join another group. For this rotation an adaptation of a model provided by Daniels (2001) was utilized. For example, all number 1s were to stay put while the 2s were to move clockwise the 3s anticlockwise and the four jumped a number. The groups were labelled in alphabetical order. As Bygate (2006) argues, by repeating the same or similar tasks the students build on what they have already done to access, formulate words and grammatical structures more efficiently. Similarly, Lynn and Maclean (2000) in their study revealed that repeating, recycling had positive effects on accuracy. The instructor went around monitoring each group and provided personalized feedback. Between the rotations the instructor presented a version of the tasks done as models, explained the details and gave feedback on what had been monitored. The students then rotated forming new groups and the same process was repeated four or five times during the class. On the 11<sup>th</sup> week, both classes were given a writing assignment.

### 3.0 Results and post-study interviews

After marking and comparing the essays of both classes, it became evident that the class who took the literature circle approach had in general a more elaborated vocabulary. An example of this was the good use of cohesive devices, *therefore*, *however*, *additionally*, *furthermore*, as well as other function words. They also wrote more concise essays than the other class where an important number of students omitted integral parts of essays in their writing. Amongst other, in the integrated task; lack of introduction or statistics and in the independent task; topic sentences, thesis statements in the introduction, lack of clarity due to over-simplistic vocabulary and repetitions of words, “and/but” being of particular concern as well as the word “Thing” used to convey a wide range of meanings.

On the last day of the 1<sup>st</sup> term the instructor conducted informal interviews with the class which took the LC approach about their experience. The motive of the interview was to look into the students’ perspective and possibly suggestions for a further study. The questions were centered on the students’ perception toward the approach, how/if it benefited them and any further suggestions for improvement for the implementation of the approach. The answers from this interview can be split in two parts; positive and neutral comments. The majority of the students considered the approach positive and enjoyable with some students reporting they acquired new vocabulary as a result. Amongst them, however, a number of student felt unsure about the carry-over of the approach in individual writing outside the classroom where nobody is here to help. Other students, although a minority, did not express themselves or did not have any particular comments to make. No suggestions for improvements were made.

### 3.1 Discussion and Conclusion

As indicated in the opening of this article, the study revealed a combination of positive and unconvincing developments. Based on the results, the comparison of the essays, the LC approach was relatively successful. Parts of the success were brought by the personalized feedback the instructor gave while monitoring each group and the multiple opportunities to practice and perspectives brought by the

various members to complete the tasks. The latter surely contributed to a better retention of what was covered in the comprehensive phases as well as a better vocabulary acquisition quality. However, flaws in the assessment method does not make it a credible study. Multiple variables come into play here, for example, assigning the same topics, tasks, amount of time and the same rubrics for assessment to both classes placed the class which did not take the LC approach at a slight disadvantage. It was obvious that the students who were exposed to diverse ideas, vocabulary and criticism from their peers were likely to compose better essays. Thus, the criteria the students were assessed on should have been altered to respect and fit in the process followed in the practice sessions. Additionally, summative assessments as the only way to assess progress might not be reliable indicators as students might just make extra efforts to study and review before the assignment. However, it is reassuring to see that most students liked the design. Reforming the original design of LC by not assigning any roles brought flexibility to the model creating more eclectic positions for the members of each group. Gardner quoted in Richards (2001), claims that every learner possesses various forms of intelligence and those can be developed when chances are given. In this study the groups functioned in a think-tank manner with the students sharing their knowledge, expertise and bringing their intelligence to the negotiation process. On the other hand, the sharing and negotiation process in the class who followed the standard approach were limited as most of the work was done in pairs with no rotation in membership. The students had the same amount of practice but much less exposure to diversity and this might explain why the performance of this class was not up to par with the other class.

The purpose of this study was to implement an adaptation of LC to a writing class with the aim of enhancing students' writing skills. The study was positive but somewhat failed to design a reliable and comparable test enabling the researchers to investigate whether the students became better writers. It enjoyed a certain amount of success and was positively welcomed by the students. Therefore a better contrastive study should be done by comparing 2 or more classes following the same approach done on a longer length including both formative and summative assessments. It would be additionally interesting to compare classes with assigned roles to classes with non-assigned roles.

The literature circle approach is still a fresh idea and should be encouraged to be implemented to a wider range of courses as it provides more opportunity to approach second language learning actively. By giving the right of choice to our students more opportunities will be created for them to become more active communicators regardless of the medium used.

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## Appendix A

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; Structured overview of all CEFR scales

### OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION

*C2 Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.*

*C1. Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.*

*B2. Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.*

*B1 Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.*

*A2 Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like “and”, “but” and “because” .*

*A1 Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences. Note: The descriptors on this scale and on the two sub-scales which follow (Creative Writing; Reports & Essays) sub-scale have not been empirically calibrated with the measurement model. The descriptors for these three scales have therefore been created by recombining elements of descriptors from other scales*

### REPORTS & ESSAYS

*C2. Can produce clear, smoothly flowing, complex reports, articles or essays which present a case, or give critical appreciation of proposals or literary works. Can provide an appropriate and effective logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.*

*C1. Can write clear, well-structured expositions of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues. Can expand and support points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples.*

*B2. Can write an essay or report that develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail. Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem. Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.*

*B1. Can write short, simple essays on topics of interest. Can summarise, report and give his/her opinion about accumulated factual information on familiar routine and non-routine matters within his field with some confidence. Can write very brief, reports to a standard*



*conventionalised format, which pass on routine factual information and state reasons for actions.*

*A2.A1. No descriptor available*

## Appendix B

The students were tested on both an integrated & independent writing essay. The integrated writing required the students to study a document, in this case in the form of a graph, table or chart, and summarize it in writing. The independent writing task require students to state their opinion on a specific question. The following was covered during the comprehensive phases and served as rubrics for evaluating their final writing assignment.

### For the integrated task:

-Writing an introduction explaining what the nature of the document was and what it was about.

*For example, this pie chart shows the proportion of.....*

-Showing a good understanding of the data presented

-Presenting the data in their general and specific forms

*For example, "in 2010, there was a gradual increase in enrollments(general) between March & July, respectively 50%" .*

-Showing a good understanding of academic writing format

*Introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion*

-Using synonyms where relevant and appropriate vocabulary

-Showing a good knowledge of grammar and punctuation

### For the independent writing task:

- Writing an introduction pertaining to the question with all the elements that it comprises

*For example, the hook, the thesis statement, the scope, hedging*

- writing topic sentences, support sentences, giving examples and expanding ideas

-Using synonyms & paraphrasing to avoid repetitions

-using a varied vocabulary

- Using anaphoric or cataphoric signposting to introduce or summarize ideas

-writing a conclusion