UTILIZING ASSIGNED ROLES IN EFL LITERATURE CIRCLES

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ABSTRACT

Originally developed for the L1 classroom, literature circles have since been adapted to the EFL context, with the dual purpose of helping students improve reading skills and discourse. In EFL settings particularly, it is common for teachers to scaffold literature circles by assigning roles to students to demonstrate the various strategies that can be used to connect with a text. This article describes the first stage of an action research study, in which a class of Japanese sophomore university students utilized an assigned roles framework to collaboratively discuss a piece of graded fiction. Class procedures, analysis of individual roles, and issues that emerged are discussed. The study found that for assigned roles to succeed in an L2 context, pre-lesson teacher coaching and peer support were of paramount importance and it is recommended that students be afforded preview time to enhance comprehension of individual discussion points.

INTRODUCTION

Literature circles (or reading circles) first came to prominence in the early 1990s in the USA and entail small, temporary discussion groups of students who have read the same text (Daniels, 2002). Meetings are scheduled regularly with students controlling discussions. Designed to promote both reading and experiential learning, literature circles serve as a vehicle to inspire ideas, raise questions, and facilitate discussion.

Strengths of literature circles include facilitation of collaborative inquiry through student-initiated inquiry and choice, and fostering of mutual interdependence, whereby language outcomes exceed the sum of the individual readers' parts (Furr, 2007). Furthermore, literature circles enable readers to approach a text from multiple angles, and promote independent learning as students generate discussion questions themselves, increasing both students' comprehension and investment (Nelson, 1984).

Literature circles have become increasingly common in classrooms around the world, including those focused on English as a foreign language (EFL). The student autonomy afforded by literature circles, as well as the authentic L1 exposure they provide, are among the many benefits that can be derived from their use in the L2 classroom.

Benefits of Literature Circles in an EFL Context

Perhaps the greatest strength of EFL literature circles is that "discussion content, pace, direction, and lexical complexity are at the students' own level rather than that of the instructor" (Williams, 2011, p. 220). Furthermore, Larson (2008) detailed the safe environment literature circles can provide for EFL learners, building their confidence and enabling risk-taking. Graham-Marr (2015) praised literature circles for introducing

participants to "words, phrases and idioms that are more associated with lifestyle and culture than they might otherwise encounter" (p. 86). Additionally, L2 learners can use their differing funds of knowledge to offer alternative insights into a text (Brock, 1997), and can often collectively make sense of a text that they would not have been able to understand individually (Maher, 2013). However, incorporating literature circles within an EFL context requires certain adjustments to traditional models.

Considerations Regarding Literature Circles in an EFL Context
Daniels (2002) listed eleven crucial ingredients for the successful implementation of literature circles. Seen by many as the central axis around which literature circles revolve, authors such as Furr (2007) have suggested some alterations to Daniels' list to adapt literature circles to the EFL environment. Furr proposed that teachers themselves choose reading materials to match students' language levels, and that groups should be formed based on student choice or at the teacher's discretion. In addition, he suggested that different groups read the same text, and that post-discussion activities should be incorporated into literature circle lessons to clarify certain aspects of the text and facilitate further discussion.

Text choice is clearly fundamental to the success of literature circles, as students not only need to be able to read and engage with the material, but also have the vocabulary to discuss related issues. Graded versions of texts are often utilized by EFL teachers, as they introduce students to various aspects of culture and lifestyle in a more digestible form. Furthermore, by employing graded material, the necessity for extensive lexical study is reduced, and the comprehensible input (Krashen, 1983) provided can foster not only deeper insights, but also engender critical thinking. In addition, students reading the same text ensures consistency in student workload and teacher instructions.

The Teacher's Role
In addition to managing basic control of the class, Daniels (2006) described the need for "constant coaching and training by a very active teacher who uses mini-lessons and debriefings to help kids hone skills like active listening, asking follow-up questions, disagreeing agreeably, dealing with 'slackers,' and more" (p. 13). During the main discussions, Shelton-Strong (2012) described how "the teacher's role reverts to one of quiet but attentive observation" (p. 217), with Maher (2013) suggesting teachers monitor for difficult idioms, concepts or cultural differences that students may have difficulty understanding alone. Mark (2007) proposed listening carefully and identifying what further scaffolding is required to enhance student understanding.

Use of Role Sheets
A common feature of literature circles is the use of role sheets. Designed to provide clearly defined tasks to guide students' preparation, examples of roles that can be rotated amongst students are Summarizer, Connector and Discussion Leader (see Appendix A). Providing students with set roles helps to ensure that each student has a different cognitive purpose for reading, and a different interactive purpose for the discussion, each time they participate in literature circles. Performing a variety of roles also raises students' consciousness of reading for different reasons (Shelton-Strong, 2012).

However, it would be remiss not to broach criticism of role sheets in literature circles, specifically their tendency to stifle. Daniels (2006) complained of "the mechanical discussions that can stem from over-dependence on these roles," (p. 11) and argued that assigned roles should be utilized as a temporary support measure only.

It was with this consideration in mind that this study was designed, seeking to investigate the efficacy of assigned roles as a guiding framework for those new to literature circles. The following research question was generated:

Research Question
How can assigned roles be optimized for EFL learners as they are introduced to literature circles?

METHODS

Participants
The study participants were International Communication majors in my academic reading class. There were nineteen sophomore students in the class (fifteen females and four males), and we met for ninety minutes, twice a week, during each fifteen-week semester. Literature circles took place four times during the Fall semester, and this study was conducted during the third occurrence. The students were therefore already familiar with assigned roles, having utilized them twice previously to discuss a graded reader version of *Billy Elliot*. Before the study began, all participants signed consent forms having read a detailed breakdown of the study in both English and Japanese.

Materials
Regarding book choice, Monson (1995) cited three key ingredients: the text arouses learners' emotions, is well-written, and is meaningful. I decided upon a graded reader version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, not only with Monson's recommendations in mind, but also because it was timely (the lessons were held close to Christmas) and the main protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, neatly tied in with the current class unit: ethics. In addition, the book was graded to CEFR B1, an appropriate level for the majority of the students in the class. Books were distributed to the students a fortnight before the first discussion, and I gave a short presentation to whet the students' appetite for reading the book, including a brief synopsis, a summary of the themes covered, and a description of the book's influence on Christmas celebrations worldwide.

Groupings and Timing
The students were tasked with reading the first half of the book, as well as completing their role sheets. Each group had four or five members, and had remained together throughout the semester, changing roles each time (see Table 1.1) to expose the students to a variety of text approaches. Groups had been allocated by the teacher to avoid cliques, and to ensure ability levels were mixed in all groups. Literature circles were held approximately once every two weeks, giving the students time to read the assigned chapters and complete their role sheets outside of class. Students were explicitly told that, in the case of absence, it was their responsibility to send their completed preparation to their group.

Student Roles

Utilizing a combination of role titles and descriptions suggested by Daniels (2002), Furr (2011) and Maher (2015), and making small adjustments to suit my own teaching context, I offered the students the following six role choices:

Table 1.1: Role descriptions

Role title	Role description	Role work required in advance of discussion
Discussion Leader (see Appendix A)	Starts the discussion with one or two questions. Guides the discussion, ensuring each member presents their information.	At least five thought-provoking questions related to the text.
Summarizer	Provides a summary focusing on the text's key points.	A written summary.
Connector	Describes connections between the text and the world outside. Elicits connections from peers.	At least two possible connections to the text.
Word Master	Defines five words from the text. Describes why they are important.	A table detailing the five words chosen, their text location, definitions, and importance.
Passage Person	Describes important passages from the text. Asks related questions to peers.	Notes on three passages important to the plot, explaining the characters, or containing interesting or powerful language.
Culture Collector	Shares cultural similarities and differences between the text and their own culture. Asks related questions to peers.	Notes on two or three passages from the text that show cultural similarities or differences to their own culture.

The Lesson Itself

Of the nineteen students registered in the class, seventeen attended the lesson. Both absentees informed me in advance that they would miss the class due to influenza, but had already completed their role sheets and shared them with their groups.

The lesson began with a short warm-up activity in which the students discussed enjoyable aspects and challenges regarding both reading the text and completing their role sheets. The main discussion then followed and ran for approximately thirty-five minutes. I monitored the

conversations quietly, while taking notes. At the end of the main discussion, I provided feedback and some error correction, mainly focusing on vocabulary and pronunciation, before moving on to the review discussion. I chose to focus on two review themes: comparing how Christmas was celebrated in the book versus students' personal experiences and students' knowledge and experiences of ghosts.

Data Collection

The main discussions were audio recorded using pocket-sized digital recorders, seen as the best method of capturing data whilst minimizing distraction to the students. As Liddicoat (2007) stated, audio recorders are less intrusive than video recorders, and require less manpower to set up and monitor. Furthermore, the students remained in fixed positions, which made it possible to place the recorders in the center of each table, capturing the students' voices clearly. All four groups' conversations were transcribed post-lesson, with student names redacted to ensure confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section begins with a brief summary of each individual group's performance, before moving on to discuss salient issues that arose.

Group Summaries

Group One, the only group containing five students, completed their discussion in the allotted time, although the order of roles was unusual. Despite my explicit instructions to begin with the Discussion Leader, Group One began with the Summarizer and finished with the Discussion Leader. The conversation was lively throughout with many connections made, including comparisons between Scrooge and their school teachers, as well as between Scrooge and *kuribocchi*, a Japanese expression describing people who spend Christmas (*kuri*) by themselves (*bocchi*).

Group Two also continued their conversation for the entirety of the discussion time. Extended conversations ensued from the Discussion Leader's thought-provoking questions, including asking what message her peers would send to the childhood version of themselves, and how they would cope with a Scrooge-like supervisor at their workplace (see Appendix B). Despite this strong start, Group Two had difficulties in clarifying not only ideas from the text, but also their own interpretations, when executing the Connector and Passage Person roles.

Group Three experienced many difficulties, especially in regard to elaborating on ideas and producing extended conversations. Although the Discussion Leader role went relatively smoothly, subsequent discussions floundered due to issues such as closed questions, and language errors that caused confusion. Although I intervened on several occasions to get them back on track, the last fifteen minutes of Group Three's conversation was mainly spent discussing unrelated topics.

While able to complete their discussion, Group Four had perhaps the largest discrepancy in terms of L2 ability. This led to lengthy clarifying episodes, but also provided an excellent example of peer learning, whereby three of the students were introduced to connections between the text and real world (namely unscrupulous business practices, and child displacement) that they would otherwise have been unlikely to extract. Although the

conversation was sometimes dominated by the strongest student, the other members of the group were comfortable asking for clarification and, once able to understand the concepts raised, could contribute their own ideas.

Peer Support and L1 Usage
One highly significant feature across all groups was how supportive the students were. Regardless of their L2 abilities and individual personality traits, all the students showed enthusiasm towards their classmates' ideas and questions. In particular, students patiently negotiated meaning in all four groups, and there were no instances of students capitulating when communication breakdowns occurred and moving on to the next topic. Furthermore, L1 usage was low, mainly limited to thinking time expressions or quick confirmation of advanced vocabulary. In their second semester together as a class, the rapport and mutual trust built up may well have been a contributing factor to these positive behaviors, and perhaps points to ensuring that students build a relationship together as a class before literature circles are introduced.

Balance of Talk between Roles: The Importance of Asking Questions
A breakdown of the balance of talk is shown below in Table 1.2. The left-hand column displays the order in which the roles appeared on the template distributed to students, while ordinal numbers in brackets represent the order in which each group decided to complete them. All timings were rounded to the nearest fifteen seconds.

Table 1.2: Role length in minutes (m)

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Average time
Discussion Leader	(5th) 10m	(1st) 14m30	(1st) 12m	(1st) 8m45	11m15
Summarizer	(1st) 2m15	(2nd) 4m	(2nd) 2m45		3m
Connector	(3rd) 8m	(3rd) 6m		(2nd) 8m	7m15
Word Master	(2nd) 2m30		(3rd) 3m45	(3rd) 4m30	3m30
Passage Person	(4th) 10m30	(4th) 6m45		(4th) 13m30	10m15
Culture Collector			(4th) 2m30		2m30

One aspect common across all the groups was the significance of asking questions. As the Summarizer and Word Master roles focus on reporting information, as expected, they produced somewhat limited dialogue (less than five minutes of interaction in all cases, as displayed in Table 1.2). However, while the four other roles aim to engender lengthy discussions, this often failed to transpire, especially with respect to the Connector and Culture Collector roles.

Examination of the transcripts revealed that none of the Connectors asked a question. In Group One, the Connector gave an entertaining description of a personal experience at school which sparked a conversation based on her classmates' similar experiences, but her remaining two connections were simply acknowledged and the conversation moved on. Similarly, in Group Two, the Connector made insightful connections with Scrooge, from her own experiences of dining alone to the burden of carrying negative experiences with you through life. However, group interaction was often limited to clarification, as her peers attempted to collectively make sense of her message, such as in the exchange below:

> Discussion Leader: Became what?
> Connector: Became chain. Chain.
> Discussion Leader: Ah, chain. Chain!
> Connector: Became chains. So, so we must live with this chain forever. A lot of experience bad things, good things.
> Summarizer: Ah, metaphor? You think that chain is metaphor?

This highlights a major difficulty with L2 literature circles: while teachers may be able to select a text that matches the students' abilities, skills such as elaborating and explaining can be problematic in students' L2.

However, the most pronounced difficulties were evident in Group Three's Culture Collector dialogue. Having struggled through the previous section due to careless preparation by their Word Master (mistakes included 'a milkman' being someone who buys milk, and 'fog' being misspelled as 'frog'), the problems continued with the Culture Collector. Although she had identified cultural links and prepared three questions as instructed, none of her questions prompted meaningful exchanges. For example:

> Page 8 from line 22 to 23. Suddenly, to his great surprise, he saw that the knocker was not a knocker any more, but had become the face of Jacob Marley. I think this is culture difference between Japan and England, so I chose this situation. And my cultural question is, is your home has an intercom or door knocker? (Culture Collector, Group Three)

Somewhat predictably, all students answered "Intercom," and although the Culture Collector asked, "Have you ever used a door knocker?" one student answered "Maybe I have," and the conversation moved on. The remaining interaction followed a similar pattern with "Have you ever seen a ghost on Christmas?" and "Have you ever participate in a dance party on Christmas Eve?" Both questions were met with a simple "No," and Group Three's literature circle discussion effectively ended there, as they digressed to unrelated topics in spite of repeated teacher interventions.

Open Questions Based on Personal Experiences

Despite these issues, there were numerous examples of questions that sparked lengthy discussions and contributions from multiple group members. These questions tended to have two common traits: they were open questions, and they focused on students' personal experiences and feelings, rather than the characters'. A comparison between the first passage-based conversations of Groups One and Two provides evidence of this phenomenon:

> Little by little, the spirits and their voices disappeared into the fog and the darkness, and the night was silent again. The reason for choosing this passage is the word silent. I see silent many times. It implies Scrooge's mind. The question is, do you like the silent place or noisy place and why? (Passage Person, Group One)

> Christmas is humbug! I choose this sentence because the main character Scrooge said Christmas is humbug is many times so I thought it was very important words to understand this book, this story. And question about this passage is, what do you think, why Scrooge doesn't like Christmas Day? (Passage Person, Group Two)

Both excerpts concerned language, yet Group One discussed their experience-based question for three minutes with four different students contributing answers, whereas Group Two answered their character-based question in less than a minute with only one student responding.

This pattern continued with passages two and three. Group One's Passage Person asked her group if they would find another companion if they lost someone like Scrooge had, followed by whether they would cut ties with a family member who exhibited similar behavior to Scrooge. Both questions were answered in detail by multiple group members. Meanwhile, Group Two were tasked with discussing Jacob Marley's intention when telling Scrooge, "You still have a chance to save yourself from what has happened to me," as well as analyzing Scrooge's feelings in a passage where he was reminded of his childhood. Responses tended to consist of one-sentence answers with long pauses, and students muttering "Difficult" in their L1.

Both Passage Person students had selected passages carefully and analyzed them critically, yet Group One's experience-based conversation went much more smoothly than Group Two's text-based discussion. The same phenomenon could also be witnessed among the Discussion Leaders. While the Group One, Two and Three Discussion Leaders all asked questions related to personal experiences and feelings, Group Four's leader asked questions about Scrooge and Marley's personalities (in essence, why they both got married despite being unscrupulous people), as well as asking for predictions regarding the remaining chapters. As shown in Table 1.2, Group Four's Discussion Leader section was significantly shorter than that of other groups, and the question types chosen appear to have been a major contributory factor.

Although character-driven questions may have caused an issue, it would be impulsive to abandon them completely. Perhaps the students found it difficult to empathize with the characters in this particular text or the story simply did not resonate with them. However,

ensuring that students are aware of different question types and encouraging them to prepare a variety of questions may well overcome the problems that arose in this lesson.

Students Providing Model Answers
One final standout feature of the literature circle involved the Passage Person role in Group Four. The second longest section across all groups at over thirteen minutes (see Table 1.2), it appeared to be successful for three reasons. Firstly, the Passage Person's questions focused on personal experiences. Secondly, the student elaborated on each passage, explaining the emotions he felt when reading it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, he provided his own model answer when his group members were slow to respond. For example:

> Passage Person: Page 25, Line 1. The noise became twice as loud, as the children received their presents with delight… The author explain their voice. Children more happy to receive their present. Author explained 'twice as loud', so it's easy to understand. It's well-written passage. What is your happy memory happened recently?
> Connector: Happy memory? Oh…
> Discussion Leader: Happy memory?
> Passage Person: I gave money from my parents.
> All: Oh! Really?!

The Passage Person continued on to explain that whenever his parents receive a bonus from their companies, they give him some extra spending money as a present, and he had recently received such a gift. The other students could then provide their own examples, resulting in smooth interaction with contributions from all group members.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With the exception of Group Three, the literature circle groups maintained focus on the text throughout the thirty-five-minute discussion. The majority of students had prepared thoroughly, and the main issue appeared to be explaining their connections, elaborations, and evaluations in their L2, as opposed to actually making them.

For this reason, I would strongly recommend incorporating preview time into EFL literature circles. By giving students the opportunity to carefully read and comprehend their peers' ideas in written form before the actual discussion, as well as ask clarification questions, literature circles are likely to run more smoothly. Moreover, setting a role work submission deadline a day or two in advance of the literature circle discussion would also give the teacher time to evaluate students' preparation, and identify potential issues that might arise. Teachers could offer suggestions to students on how to clarify their ideas for easier consumption by their peers, or help them to structure questions more accurately. However, the focus must be on comprehensibility: literature circles should be student-centered and student-led, and therefore instructors must avoid revising the students' actual ideas.

This study also reinforced that teachers must commit to several cycles of literature circles to produce a positive outcome (Furr, 2011). While the Summarizer and Word Master roles offer students a unique form of textual analysis, they rarely involve leading a discussion or drawing

out opinions from peers. Role rotation exposes students to not only different ways of approaching a text, but also to an array of in-class experiences.

Finally, the importance of regular teacher coaching (Daniels, 2006) was strongly underlined. The travails experienced by Group Three highlighted that the students perhaps lacked the necessary skill set to perform the task as required, and more training was needed, particularly regarding open questions and asking for more information. Considering these difficulties, this perhaps adds further weight to the argument for earlier submission of role work: not only could I have potentially identified Group Three as the most likely to struggle, but I could have provided them with a selection of their classmates' best ideas to discuss once they had exhausted their own discussion material.

Successful implementation of literature circles in an EFL context requires thoughtful consideration of a variety of issues. This study has highlighted both the value, and some pitfalls, of an assigned role framework, yet a more complete picture could be provided by further research. Longitudinal studies measuring the progress of groups of students over time, or focus group interviews reflecting on students' experiences, could shed further light on how to enhance literature circles. Nonetheless, conducting this project reinforced the merits of assigned role frameworks, and provided me with a number of avenues to explore to further empower and engage my students through literature circles.

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Appendix A: Discussion Leader Role Sheet
(Adapted from *Oxford Bookworms Club Reading Circle Teacher's Handbook*. This is not an official adaptation, nor has this been endorsed in any way by Oxford University Press.)

ROLE 1: Discussion Leader

Story: _____
Name: _____

The Discussion Leader's job is to:

- read the story twice, and prepare at least five general questions about it.
- ask one or two questions to start the Reading Circle discussion.
- make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and joins in the discussion.
- call on each member to present their prepared role information.
- guide the discussion and keep it going.

Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and questions as you read. (What surprised you, made you smile, made you feel sad?) Write down your questions as soon as you have finished reading. It is best to use your own questions, but you can also use some of the ideas at the bottom of this page.

<u>My questions</u>

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Possible ideas for questions:

- Questions about the characters (like/not like them, true to life/not true to life . . .?)
- Questions about the theme (friendship, romance, parents/children, ghosts . . .?)
- Questions about the ending (surprising, expected, liked it/did not like it . . .?)
- Questions about what will happen next. (These can also be used for a longer story.)

Appendix B: Group Two Discussion Leader Section Excerpt

Discussion Leader: Okay, second question. If you could see child you, what do you want to tell you?
All: Ehhhhh?!
Passage Person: As myself?
Connector: Keep doing!
Discussion Leader: Why? Which age do you want to see?
Summarizer: Elementary school.
Passage Person: Junior High.
Discussion Leader: Me too, Junior High.
Passage Person: No, High actually.
Connector: Eh? Me too, High. High or Elementary.
Discussion Leader: Eh? Why? What do you want to tell you?
Connector: Keep going. Take it easy. Maybe, before me, same as now me, always smiling. Happy person, so...
Discussion Leader: Yeah, I think so too.
Connector: Keep doing!
Summarizer: I want to say you should more study and more reading.
Passage Person: You have to study hard? Same, same!
Discussion Leader: When I was high school student, I didn't study. I just play basketball.
Passage Person: You should have studied more! Eh, I wanna say to me, be honest and not regret. I wanna say.
Discussion Leader: *Hai* [Yes], number three question. If your supervisor is mean like Scrooge, do you quit your job? Why or why not?
Connector: Maybe I will quit job.
Discussion Leader: Quit? How about not part-time job?
Connector: Real job?
Discussion Leader: Real job. *Seshain* [Permanent] job.
Connector: Ohhhh!
Passage Person: Maybe I didn't quit. But maybe I try to... I try to look for some different job.
Discussion Leader: If you could find new job, you will quit?
Passage Person: Yeah.
All: Good idea.
Connector: But maybe I will quit job, because I have very weak mental.
Passage Person: Weak mental?
Connector: In Japanese, *tofu* [weak] mental. Yes, easy to break mental. So, simply my *nan te iu no* [how do you say], thought, thinking, don't like person is don't like, hate, so shut out.
Passage Person: Your thinking will not change?
Connector: Yes. Bye bye.
Passage Person: Even if I don't like this person, but I behave more good. Good behavior.
Summarizer: I will not quit. Keep the job. If I take care my family and myself, I have to continue the job if the job was awful. Me too, I, you said you would look for jobs. I want to try to look for job too.