ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN *ASK THE TEACHER* SECTION IN READING CIRCLES: PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR READING RESPONSE LOGS

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ABSTRACT

In response to criticisms of traditional Reading Circle structures, an alternative method employing reading response logs has been proposed to enhance student autonomy and deepen textual engagement. Drawing from previous action research, this article presents findings from a study in which Japanese university students utilized reading response logs featuring an innovative Ask the Teacher *segment. The study examines students' log entries, the teacher's handling of* Ask the Teacher *queries, and incorporates student feedback. Results show that participants who used the* Ask the Teacher *feature valued the feedback received, resulting in enriching learning experiences during class. However, the adoption of this new feature was limited, highlighting the need for further investigation into methods for encouraging greater student engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

The use of reading circles in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has been a widely recognized method for enhancing students' reading proficiency and fostering discourse. As stated by Karatay (2017), reading circles enhance students' reading comprehension by improving text analysis skills, fostering a social learning environment, boosting critical reading abilities, increasing the desire to read independently, enhancing self-confidence and speaking skills, and promoting tolerance for cultural and socio-economic diversity. A recent study by Tayeb (2022) also indicates that students exhibit increased interest and engagement in literature through participation in literature circles. However, the conventional practice of assigning roles within these circles has faced criticism for its potential to constrain student participation and inhibit meaningful conversation (Daniels, 2006).

In response to this concern, educators have explored alternative approaches, such as implementing reading response logs, which aim to empower students with greater autonomy and facilitate deeper engagement with the text. Such logs provide a means for readers to record their thoughts, reflections, and reactions to material as they read. Through completing their logs, it is hoped that learners will focus on the experience they have while reading, going beyond merely focusing on the words in the text.

An example of a student reading log (Benton, 1992, p.35), can be seen below:

Figure 1 Benton's (1992) Reading Log Guidelines

While you are reading the book, write down all the things that go on in your head in a "stream of consciousness" style. As you read, you will be making a record of images, associations, feelings, thoughts, judgments, etc. You will probably find that this record will contain:

- Questions that you ask yourself about characters and events as you read. (Answer these yourself when you can.)
- Memories from your own experience provoked by the reading.
- Guesses about how you think the story will develop, and why.
- Reflections on striking moments and ideas in the book.
- Comparisons between how you behave and how the characters in the novel are behaving.
- Thoughts and feelings about characters and events.
- Comments on how the story is being told. For example, any words or phrases or even whole passages that make an impression on you, or motifs which you notice the author keeps using.
- Connections to other texts, ideas and courses.
- An outline of the chapter, no longer than a paragraph.

Please date each entry, and note down the time and place, as well as the mood you are in while reading.
Please note down the page number you are reading when you make an entry.
Please take pleasure and pride in your log.
Please do not try to rewrite the book.

CONTEXT

Adapting Reading Response Logs to Fit My Teaching Context

Given that reading response logs, like those authored by Benton (1992), were initially designed for native English speakers, modifications were necessary to accommodate the Japanese EFL students in my classes. These adjustments aimed to enhance clarity of instruction and offer additional support through scaffolding. Moreover, in order to build upon the students' previous experiences with Literature Circles, a number of terms needed to be altered to echo language from the assigned role sheets that the students had utilized in the previous semester.

Careful consideration was also given to the expected quantity and length of student responses. While reading response logs conventionally represent an individual endeavor, in this specific context, they function as a tool to facilitate Reading Circle discussions. As a result, students were tasked with submitting only three responses in each log, influenced by findings from a previous action research study (Gill, 2023), which revealed that students seldom discussed more than two or three responses in a forty-minute discussion, despite being required to submit five. To ensure students grasped the desired level of detail for their responses, an exemplar log entry was provided for each of the assigned reading materials.

In each reading response entry, students were required to include a passage from the text, their reaction to it, a question, and their own suggested answer. This approach aligned with Probst's (2004) recommendations for integrating literature response into English language arts instruction. Probst advised educators to offer students chances for "reading, responding, articulating questions, and contemplating potential answers" (p. 18).

However, the most significant alteration to the logs entailed the addition of an *Ask the Teacher* supplement. In prior research on reading response logs (Gill, 2023), two response categories, *Language* and *Question*, presented notable challenges for the students during class discussions. The *Language* category, for instance, saw minimal utilization, with only two instances recorded. However, neither of these led to meaningful interaction among the students: one pertained to the pronunciation of the family name *Cratchit*, while the other involved admitting unfamiliarity with the term *torch* until consulting a dictionary.

The *Question* category presented an entirely different challenge: given that students likely reviewed their chosen passages extensively before posing questions, expecting immediate answers from their peers proved unrealistic. This issue is exemplified in a recorded excerpt from the 2023 study, where a student's query prompted extended silence from their group members:

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> Page 38, Line 2: The boy is crime. The girl is need. They will destroy man if nothing is done about them. My response is... Question, uh, I'm just wondering, what are the boy and girl, are they human beings or ghosts? Ah, gomen [sorry]. Where do they come from? What do humans need to do about them? That is what I can't understand in this book. (Gill, 2023, p.53)

Given these difficulties, it was decided to create a separate section for the *Language* and *Question* sub-categories, removing them from the main reading response log. This new standalone section, called *Ask the Teacher*, would allow students to directly ask the teacher questions about language or content.

Handling Students' Questions Sensitively and Appropriately

Having established a new protocol for eliciting students' questions and language issues, the subsequent challenge was to devise strategies for dealing with those queries within the lesson itself. Responses shared with the teacher that were seen as either very specific to the individual student, or responses which misunderstood the task in some way, would be handled directly with the student through the Learning Management System (LMS), in this case, Google Classroom.

Conversely, inquiries or remarks identified as potentially beneficial to the entire cohort would be disseminated to all students. However, various studies have underscored the reticent tendency among Japanese EFL learners (Humphries et al., 2015), particularly in contexts where they may stand out (Anderson, 1993). Consequently, a decision was made to anonymize the shared responses to mitigate potential embarrassment for the contributors and to foster broader utilization of the *Ask the Teacher* section among students, assuring them that their participation would not subject them to individual scrutiny.

With the above considerations in mind, the following research questions were generated for this study:

Research Questions

1. What is the efficacy of the *Ask the Teacher* section as a pedagogical tool within the reading response log framework?
2. What factors contribute to the utilization rate of the *Ask the Teacher* section within reading response logs, and what strategies could be implemented to encourage greater student uptake of this resource?

METHOD

Participants and Materials

The participants in the study were two mixed-tier classes of sophomore International Communication majors taking an academic reading course (a total of 45 students). Each class met for 90 minutes, two times a week, during each 15-week semester. Reading circle lessons took place four times during the spring semester utilizing an assigned role framework, and then four times in the fall semester, switching to reading response logs. This study was conducted during the fall semester, and monitored both classes over all four lessons.

The students were assigned two graded reader versions of popular fiction books, each divided into half for the purpose of each Reading Circle: Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* These texts were selected for their strong alignment with the Ethics unit being studied in class. The books encompass themes such as moral corruption and redemption, the consequences of actions, and the influence of others, making them particularly pertinent to the students' exploration of ethical concepts. The reading materials were assigned to the students two weeks prior to each Reading Circle lesson, and they were instructed to read the assigned half of each graded reader, as well as complete their response logs. Each book could be accessed in PDF form through the university's online library, allowing students to highlight and annotate easily as they read.

Before the project began, all participants had signed consent forms having read a detailed breakdown of the study in both English and Japanese.

The Reading Response Log

Referring to Benton's (1992) reading log guidelines (see Figure 1), and editing the response log used in my previous study (Gill, 2023), I designed the following reading response log for students to complete:

Figure 2 Reading Response Log for Dorian Gray Lesson One

Reading Response Log (Dorian Gray Part 1)

1. Read Chapters 1-9. You do not have to read everything all at once.
2. While reading, highlight any line, sentence or section that stands out to you. You can highlight the text using a different color, add a text box, underline it, etc… Write a short note to help you remember what you were thinking. (If nothing stands out to you by the time you finish reading, go back and find something to respond to.)

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3. When you finish reading, use the passages you highlighted to help you write your Reading Responses on the second page of this document. You should include at least 3 responses. A Reading Response can:
- **Evaluate**: give your opinion on a part of the story.
- **Connect**: make a connection with something from real life or another book, movie, song, etc… (e.g. How are you similar to a character in the book? Does the story remind you of something that happened to you or something from your culture?)
- Highlight an **important passage**: you realize that a certain section of the text has a big impact on the story. Why is it important? What does it mean?
- Give **advice**: you notice a character experiencing a problem in the story. What advice would you give them?
- Be a **prediction**: What do you think will happen next? What information in the story helped you to make your prediction?
- Be a **life lesson**: Did you learn anything from an event in the book that you could apply to your daily life?
- Talk about **surprise**: Did part of the story surprise you? Why?
- Be about **relationships**: Did you find any interesting or unusual relationships between characters in the book?
- Describe **feelings**: Did you have any strong feelings as you were reading the book? Why did you feel that way?
- Be your **own idea**: If you think of something else, not covered above, you can write about that too!

Please note down the page number that each Reading Response refers to, as well as the type of response. Make sure to include a question to ask your classmates, as well as your own answer. You can see an example at the top of the next page.

4. Finally, you can use the *Ask the Teacher* section at the bottom of the Reading Response Log if there is anything that you want me to help you with (this section is optional). An *Ask the Teacher* response can:
- Be about **language**: you see an unfamiliar word/expression in the text that you want to know more about
- Be a **question**: Was there something you could not understand in the text?

EXAMPLE

Entry: 1	Page: 25	Type of Response: Connect

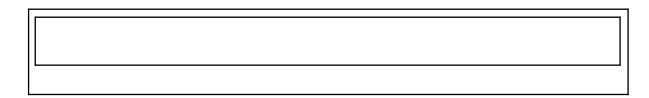| "The audience started to shout at the actors. Some people left the theater… Harry picked up his coat and stood up. 'She is very beautiful, Dorian,' he said. 'But she can't act. Let's go.'"

In this scene, many members of the audience, including Harry, want to leave the theater because of Sibyl's terrible performance.

Question: Do you stop watching TV shows, movies, or plays if you think they are boring, or do you keep watching until the end? |
|---|

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My answer: It depends. I've never left a cinema early because I paid money for it, so I feel I have to stay until the end! If I'm at home, then I will just turn off a movie after around 30 minutes if it's bad and watch something else. For a TV show, if it's less than 30 minutes, I will watch it until the end, but then never watch the rest of the series, and sometimes warn my friends not to watch it!

MY READING RESPONSES
(please complete at least 3)

Entry: 1	Page:	Type of Response:
(response) **Question:** **My answer:**		

Entry: 2	Page:	Type of Response:
(response) **Question:** **My answer:**		

Entry: 3	Page:	Type of Response:
(response) **Question:** **My answer:**		

(you may add more entries if you would like to)

Ask the Teacher (optional)	**Page(s):**

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For each Reading Circle lesson, only minor adaptations were made to the response log. These were limited to the title of the log, the chapters that students were instructed to read, and the example entry provided by the teacher (one example was provided for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and a new example entry was provided for *A Christmas Carol*).

When possible, language used from the spring semester assigned role sheets was incorporated into each Reading Response descriptor, in order to avoid overloading the students with new terminology. Each reading response log contained spaces for three responses (plus the sentence "Please add more entries if you would like to" under the third entry space). The complete two-page document was disseminated to students via Google Classroom as a Google Document two weeks prior to each class session, coinciding with the assignment of the reading texts.

Post-Study Feedback
Upon the conclusion of the study, students were requested to complete a brief questionnaire concerning their encounters with Reading Circles during the fall semester, which also encompassed providing feedback on the *Ask the Teacher* segment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section commences by analyzing the responses received through the *Ask the Teacher* feature from each class, including a thorough examination of their content. It elaborates on how the teacher handled these responses, whether during class time or directly with individual students via the LMS, and explains the rationale behind these methods. Finally, the section conducts an analysis of the student feedback obtained from the questionnaire concerning the *Ask the Teacher* feature.

Ask the Teacher Submissions
A total of 10 students used the *Ask the Teacher* section over the course of the semester (six from Class 1, and four from Class 2) with some students using it on multiple occasions. The breakdown of questions or comments submitted by Class 1, which contained 22 students, can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1 Questions/Comments Listed Within the Ask the Teacher Subsection by Class 1 Students

	Reading Circle 1	Reading Circle 2	Reading Circle 3	Reading Circle 4
Total questions / comments received	7	1	3	1
Number of students	3	1	3	1
Covered in class	7	1	3	1
Direct responses through LMS	0	0	0	0

In the first Reading Circle class, one student submitted five *Ask the Teacher* entries, but thereafter students submitted just one entry each. Example questions posed by the students included how to use question tags (for example, "You don't mind if I stay, do you?"), the difference in nuance between "to go on" and "to continue" ("But," Basil went on, "you must not listen to Harry, Dorian"), and the use of italics for emphasis in the following excerpt:

> 'What do you want to say?' cried Dorian. 'I hope you don't want to talk about me. I'm tired of myself tonight. I want to be somebody else.' But Basil *did* want to talk about Dorian.

As each in-class Reading Circle discussion was drawing to a close, I wrote students' questions onto the whiteboard and provided illustrative examples of their application. Subsequently, immediately after the discussions were finished, I dedicated a few minutes to reviewing the questions as a group, ensuring anonymity by refraining from attributing them to individual students.

All questions posed by the Class 1 students were thoughtfully written and concerned either the author's use of language or an unclear episode in the text, with one exception. In the first response log, one student wrote "What is the biggest mistake that you never told to anyone?". As Reading Circles are generally a student-centered activity, I usually avoid giving my own opinion or talking about personal experiences. However, in order to encourage students to use the *Ask the Teacher* section, rather than replying directly though the LMS, I decided to address the student's question in class, briefly describing a humorous episode from my childhood that the students would most likely enjoy hearing.

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The utilization of the *Ask the Teacher* section differed markedly for Class 2. Throughout the semester, only four out of 23 students availed themselves of it, and just one student continued to use it beyond Reading Circle 1 (see Table 2):

Table 2: Questions/Comments Listed Within the Ask the Teacher Subsection by Class 2 Students

	Reading Circle 1	Reading Circle 2	Reading Circle 3	Reading Circle 4
Total questions / comments received	4	1	0	1
Number of students	4	1	0	1
Covered in class	1	0	0	0
Direct responses through LMS	3	1	0	1

As for the content of the entries, only one of the students' responses was addressed in Reading Circle 1: a question regarding the variances between British English, found in the text, and the more familiar American English to Japanese students. Among the remaining three entries, one had an inaccurate page reference, causing difficulty in identifying the intended context, prompting communication via the LMS. The other two entries sought my personal opinion. For example:

> 'You must live your own life. You must do everything that you want to do. You must enjoy life' are good words I think. But I think that Henry is not a good person. What do you think about Henry?

In both cases, I decided to reply directly to the students through the LMS. My response to the above student was as follows:

> Nice question, and I agree with you. I think Henry is a bad influence on Dorian, and his words have a lot of power over him. Henry is encouraging Dorian to be selfish and not care about others, and a good person would not give that advice.

A notable discrepancy was observed between the *Ask the Teacher* submissions of Class 1 and Class 2. Given this disparity, I hoped to glean

further insights through soliciting feedback from the respective student cohorts.

Student Feedback

Following the conclusion of the final Reading Circle discussion, students were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their fall semester Reading Circle experiences. The questionnaire comprised five questions, with the third question specifically tied to the *Ask the Teacher* segment:

> Did you use the *Ask the Teacher* section this semester (in any of the four classes)? If yes, were you satisfied with the teacher's response? If not, why did you choose not to use it?

In Class 1, five students reported utilizing the section (one of the students who had used it earlier in the semester was absent during the questionnaire administration). In Class 2, only three students indicated using the section, as one student falsely stated *No* despite their submission of a question to the teacher in Response Log 1. All eight students expressed satisfaction with the teacher's responses. Comments included:

> Andy always answers our questions in detail. It motivated me because I know Andy does very well. I want Andy to keep doing it for students.

> I did use it. And you answer my question really clearly and with details, good examples. I could understand well and get new information by you sharing these things. Thank you.

> Yes, I used it twice and I was very satisfied with the answers. I was actually worried that teacher would tell me not to ask such easy questions. But you did not say that, so I did not have to hesitate. Furthermore, you did not simply answer questions, but gave detailed explanations and used your own experiences to share how you used the vocabulary, which was very informative.

> Yes, I asked you once this semester. The answer was clearly and easier to get. You gave some e.g of usage of phrases or words. It helped us a lot.

Furthermore, even amongst students who did not utilize the *Ask the Teacher* section, there were some positive comments regarding its inclusion and the teacher's handling of student inquiries:

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> I didn't use the *Ask the Teacher* section. Honestly, I could search on the internet if I have a question. But Teacher's explanations were more interesting and clear.

> I don't use it. But I got knowledge and it is interesting to hear teacher's response.

However, in both classes, two common answers emerged among students who did not utilize the section. 10 students (five in each class) expressed confidence in their ability to resolve any questions independently, thus perceiving no necessity to seek assistance. The most prevalent response, given by 12 students (six from each class), indicated that there was nothing that they wanted to know. In fact, one student's response encompassed both of these answers:

> No, I didn't. I have two reasons, the first of which is that I have a habit of searching for everything myself which I don't know, or understand when I'm reading something. The other is that I had no questions.

Other answers provided by the students included having no time to do it, thinking it was unnecessary as it was not a mandatory section of the log, and feeling that completing the three responses was enough homework already. Finally, one student in Class 2 commented that:

> I don't know how you respond to my question. Will you respond in front of my class? I would like to respond by sending an e-mail.

This suggests that it should have been made clearer to the students how I planned to handle their inquiries, but it was perhaps telling that this student was from Class 2, in which I only had one opportunity to respond to an *Ask the Teacher* question in class. The students in Class 1 had witnessed me handling numerous *Ask the Teacher* responses with them, and were therefore seemingly aware that they would not be singled out in any way, as feared by this particular student.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

When designing this study, the first of my research questions was "What is the efficacy of the *Ask the Teacher* section as a pedagogical tool within the reading response log framework?" A notable disparity emerged in the utilization of this feature between the two classes observed. In Class 1, students demonstrated the capacity to generate insightful inquiries, allowing the teacher to prepare detailed explanations to be given in class

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for the benefit of all the students. Feedback from students underscored the success of this initiative, as even students who had not utilized the *Ask the Teacher* section themselves responded positively to the teacher's in-class instruction. Although the sample size was very limited, the students in Class 1 appeared to benefit from the inclusion of the section and also felt it was valuable.

Conversely, in Class 2, the few students who utilized the *Ask the Teacher* section tended to exhibit confusion regarding its purpose, often seeking the teacher's personal opinions on book scenes or character behavior. This discrepancy perhaps indicates a need for enhanced guidance for students. Providing clearer instructions and examples for utilizing the *Ask the Teacher* section could help to reduce the number of off-topic queries and provide students with an enhanced understanding of what kinds of questions could be of benefit to not only themselves, but also their classmates.

The second of my research questions was "What factors contribute to the utilization rate of the *Ask the Teacher* section within reading response logs, and what strategies could be implemented to encourage greater student uptake of this resource?" As evidenced by the low number of students using the *Ask the Teacher* section, the lack of student willingness to complete the section is clearly a concern. Insights from student feedback revealed two main reasons for this lack of engagement: a personal preference for independent information retrieval, but also a perceived absence of questions. This could be associated with the simplicity of the provided materials, potentially indicating a need for more challenging content, but could also be connected to students not thinking deeply about the text. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, providing more scaffolding and examples could help students to better comprehend the purpose and potential benefits of using the *Ask the Teacher* section of the log.

To further encourage greater student uptake of the *Ask the Teacher* section, clarifying how teacher responses to queries will be handled before the Reading Circles begin could also be useful. In addition, reassuring students about the confidentiality of their inquiries and explaining alternative communication channels (in this case, private messages via the class LMS) more clearly could reduce student anxiety and increase uptake.

Moreover, students' other perceived hindrances to the utilization of the *Ask the Teacher* section need to be addressed, encompassing factors such as time constraints and perceived workload, by highlighting the inherent value conferred upon overall learning outcomes through its incorporation.

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By promoting an understanding among students that collective engagement with this resource benefits the entire cohort, students may be more motivated to allocate additional time and exert heightened effort towards its completion.

The implementation of the aforementioned strategies could potentially engender a more effective utilization of the *Ask the Teacher* section, thereby fostering heightened student engagement and enhancing the overall learning experience for Reading Circle students.

On a final note, it is important to add that avenues for future inquiry could extend beyond the confines of Reading Circles to explore the applicability of the *Ask the Teacher* paradigm in other contexts where students exhibit reticence to ask questions in front of their peers. Instances such as seeking clarification on errors made in examinations or soliciting more comprehensive explanations of assignment instructions could represent potential for exploration. Such endeavors could carry particular pertinence in cultural environments, such as Japan, where students often eschew standing out and exhibit discomfort in openly querying educators in the presence of their peers.

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