Changing writing classrooms through group dynamics

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Abstract
Teachers and students can struggle with the rigors of EFL academic writing classes. Students are often unfamiliar with the writing process and can be overwhelmed by writing academic essays. Since establishing a positive classroom environment is a key factor in learning, it is important to create this in the writing classroom. This paper focuses on improving the writing process of EFL students by using literature circles to develop positive group dynamics in a writing classroom. Typically used in reading classes, literature circles emphasize collaborative learning and role allocation to create a student-centered learning environment. By adapting the traditional roles of literature circles to meet the needs of writing students, the author sought to encourage students to strengthen their writing through communication with peers. While not a research study, this paper explains some of the perceived benefits of including literature circles in an academic writing classroom.

Keywords: writing, group dynamics, literature circles

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1. Introduction

It can be argued that university EFL writing classes in Japan are the bane of both students and instructors alike. Students often bemoan the undertaking of academic essay writing as being too demanding while instructors can become distressed when reading through essay after essay and wondering why students are not grasping the basic concepts of writing that have been reviewed repeatedly. Unlike speaking and listening skills, which have obvious benefits to students, writing skills are often underdeveloped in students, many of whom will not need English academic writing skills after graduating.

One key to understanding why Japanese students struggle with academic writing is to examine writing instruction that takes place in the Japanese education system prior to entering university. Cummins' (1980) Interdependence Hypothesis stated that L2 literacy is at least partially dependent on L1 literacy, and there has been extensive study on how L2 learners transfer their writing abilities from their L1 (Edelsky, 1982; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Mohan & Lo, 1985). As a result, we can expect that a student's L2 writing skills can be impacted by the instruction they have received in secondary education and, to think about how we can improve our students' writing, we must first understand the writing background of students.

High school writing courses in Japan fail to adequately prepare students for university academic writing courses due to an overall lack of emphasis on writing in L1 as well as L2. Gilfert, Niwa, and Sugiyama (1999) asserted that Japanese high school students have difficulty in writing in general, and the culprit is they are not taught, in their native language, how to write in a coherent, communicative manner. Even in their L1, Japanese writing students are not taught adequate writing skills so, as writing instructors, it is important to temper our expectations of the type of work that writing students produce. In their study of writing in Japanese high schools, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) found that students are not exposed to many writing-based activities in classrooms because writing in the L1 is not emphasized, which not only fails to develop writing ability, but also important academic skills such as critical thinking and conducting research. As a result, students entering a university writing course lack both the knowledge and experience to produce an academic essay. In other words, unlike speaking, listening, and reading skills, which are present in most forms of high school English assessment, writing is largely neglected in both L1 and L2.

One of the first steps in developing writing skills is for students to understand that the process of writing is not something done in a vacuum. Writing should only be thought of as a solitary activity when considering the aspect of inscription, or putting pen or pencil to paper or typing on a keyboard (Bruffee, 1999). Writers often discuss ideas, ask questions of others, and have peers look at their work so there are communicative aspects to writing which are included in the writing process. Although the actual act of writing is usually done alone, the writing process includes working with others. Bruffee (1999) stated that writing is one decision after another and that making accurate and knowledgeable decisions is something that is best learned collaboratively, or through collaborative learning.
Collaborative learning is rooted in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where what a learner can accomplish with the assistance of others can bridge the gap

between what someone is able to and not able to achieve (Vygotsky, 1978). If teachers can make their writing classes more collaborative, it may provide students with a better learning environment to strengthen their writing. Collaborative learning allows students to participate in their own learning by giving them the tools necessary to learn and giving them the opportunity to apply their learning effectively (Grover, 2010). One of the underlying premises of collaborative learning is that group members respect each other's contributions and abilities (Hogarth, 2010). In order to create this type of learning atmosphere, it is essential to have good group dynamics within a classroom.

For positive group dynamics to develop, participation by all members is crucial (Fisher & Ellis, 1990) and there needs to be open communication and high levels of inclusion, acceptance, support, and trust (Johnson & Johnson, 2003). Similarly, it is important to promote interaction among the students, let them learn about each other, encourage cooperation, and model friendly and supportive behavior by the teacher to generate rewarding group experiences (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003). If there is good group dynamics in the classroom then students are more willing to engage in discussions and develop as academic writers. If students feel they are in a safe environment, then they will be more open to acceptance, support, and trust amongst each other and develop the social aspect of writing.

Literature circles, originally developed by Harvey Daniels and his colleagues for elementary and secondary schools in America, have primarily been used in EFL in reading courses. Literature circles gives students the chance to engage in multiple discussions with classmates about the material they have read. Daniels (1994) stated, "The constant recombining of people into new groupings also enacts the principle of group dynamics whereby widespread, diffuse communication and friendship patters in a classroom build cohesion and productivity" (p. 28). When doing literature circles in a classroom, students meet with several different groups, depending on the roles or tasks they have been assigned for the reading. Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) emphasized that roles are important to the productivity of a group and that role allocation "increases the learning potential of the group and fosters development of abilities in different members" (p. 119). While teachers have reported success in using literature circles in EFL reading classes (Furr, 2004; Hsu, 2004; Sevigny & Berger, 2014), the use of literature circles can also have a positive effect on EFL writing classes.

2. Literature Circles

Literature circles involve collaborative learning and student-centered learning. The origin of literature circles is usually attributed to Karen Smith in 1982 whose fifth grade elementary school students created their own small groups to discuss the novels that they chose for independent reading without any assistance from the teacher (Daniels, 1994). This is the basis for what Daniels, in addition to Katherine L. Schlick, Nancy J. Johnson, and Bonnie Campbell Hill, developed into the literature circles that are widely used today.

Although there are many variations on how to do literature circles, the original concept of them is the basis for how teachers implement them in class. Daniels (1994) defined literature circles as small student reading groups formed and guided by the following principles:

> 1. Students *choose* their own materials;
> 2. *Small temporary* groups are formed, based on book choice;
> 3. Different groups read *different books;*
> 4. Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading;
> 5. Kids use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and discussion;
> 6. Discussion *topics come from students;*
> 7. Group meetings aim to be *open, natural conversations about books,* so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome;
> 8. In newly forming groups, students play a rotating assortment of task *roles;*
> 9. The teacher serves as a *facilitator,* not a group member or instructor;
> 10. Evaluation is by *teacher observation and student self-evaluation;*
> 11. A spirit of *playfulness and fun* pervades the room;
> 12. When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates,* and then *new groups form* around new reading choices (p.18).

While not all of these features are essential to conduct literature circles, they are the founding principles which have guided teachers interested in using literature circles in the classroom. It is also important to clear up some of the key misunderstandings of literature circles. Literature circles are not teacher-centered, are structured for student independence, responsibility, and ownership, are flexible and fluid, and not an unstructured and uncontrolled talking time for students (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). When using literature circles, the students are leading discussions based on their own questions and topics within a structured framework created by the teacher. In other words, while the teacher may be responsible for establishing how literature circles are set up within a classroom, it is the students who determine the themes and content within their discussion.

While these are the basis of literature circles, it is important to note that these can be adapted for an EFL setting. Daniels and his colleagues first implemented literature circles in elementary and secondary school classrooms in Chicago. Furr (2004) changed the first four of Daniels elements to better fit an EFL classroom by having instructors choose appropriate materials for the students, small temporary groups formed on student choice or instructor discretion, different groups reading the same text, and when books are finished, having students prepare a group project as well as the instructor providing additional information to fill in the gaps of student understanding.

Literature circles are structured for students to become independent and responsible for their learning (Noe and Johnson, 1999). One of the ways to do this is through collaboration, which is at the heart of literature circles. This is accomplished through different role sheets that students complete. While every student is responsible for

reading the text, each student has a different role to complete so each member makes a distinct contribution to the overall group. Daniels (1994) stated that what is vital to make cooperation work is, "assigning specific, structured roles to the different group members. This way, each person has a special, individual responsibility, a job to do, a piece of the puzzle to contribute if the group is to succeed" (p. 24). The use of roles is the most important aspect of literature circles.

2.1 Roles

The aspect of roles in literature circles is the real magic of literature circles (Furr, 2004). Roles are vital to collaborative work to be successful because when each person is assigned a specific role, "members feel satisfied with their part in the group process in groups with different roles and/or jobs to do; such groups can work efficiently, smoothly, and productively" (Cohen & Lotan, 2014, p. 115). Daniels' (1994) original literature circle roles for non-fiction included a Discussion Director, Passage Master, Vocabulary Enricher, Illustrator, and a Connector. The Discussion Director is responsible for creating questions to ask the other group members and lead the group discussion. The Passage Master chooses different sections of the reading and explains the reasons for choosing the selected passages. The Vocabulary Enricher shares the important words that are found in the reading and explains to the group the meaning so that everyone in the group understands the vocabulary. The Illustrator draws a visual representation of the reading. It can be a specific scene, a character, a flow chart, or anything related to the reading. The Connector must find ways to connect the reading to the outside world. For the roles to be successful, there should be a mix of structure and openness so roles should specify a purpose or task for the reading rather than the general content, while still being open-ended to allow students to understand that there is more than one correct answer (Daniels, 1994). Upon finishing the reading, each student does his or her assigned role and then shares the information with the group.

2.2 Roles for writing classes

In an attempt to make writing classes more collaborative, the author tried using literature circles in a university writing class. For an academic writing class, not all of Daniels' original roles are relevant and they need to be adapted to a writing context. The roles were revised into a Leader/Quiz Master, Summarizer/Illustrator, and Passage/Reference Person. The Leader/Quiz Master was responsible for creating two comprehension questions about the reading and two discussion questions based on the reading. The Summarizer/Illustrator summed up the reading into three key points and made one illustration of the reading. The Passage/Reference Person chose three passages from the reading, explained why they were chosen and then did the APA referencing information for the reading.

Each role was modified so that it contributed to establishing positive group dynamics while also addressing a specific writing skill. The Leader/Quiz Master was responsible for facilitating the discussion by asking members to share their role work with the group. In addition, the Leader/Quiz Master learned how to analyze a text and gather ideas. Since this role is responsible for creating comprehension and discussion questions, the Leader/Quiz Master also learned to pick out key details to ask the other members of the group.

By summarizing the reading, the Summarizer/Illustrator used summarizing skills that are useful in writing concluding sentences as well as closing paragraphs. Also, by creating an illustration of the reading, this role usually brought about the most laughter in the group as both the Summarizer/Illustrator and the rest of the group members typically had a mixture of appreciation, humor, and fun when looking at the illustration. This meets Daniels' (1994) fifth element of using a written or drawn note to guide their discussion as well as his eleventh one of bringing a spirit of playfulness and fun to the room.

The ability to correctly use APA format in writing is not easy for many EFL students, so the Passage/Reference Person has the opportunity to practice these skills by doing three citations of the reading as well as the reference for the reading. By explaining why the passages were chosen as well teaching group members how to reference the reading, it fulfills Greenlee and Karanxha's (2010) characteristics of creating good group dynamics by focusing on a common goal with the desire to benefit all members. If the students were going to use these citations in their essay, it was essential for them to understand the APA format for the article. (Role Sheets Appendix A)

All of the roles in these adapted literature circles were designed to both teach writing skills and facilitate good group dynamics to create a more effective learning environment. Day and Ainley (2008) stated that a classroom with literature circles gives students, "an opportunity to hear a wide range of cultural perspectives, language, and points of views in a non-threatening environment" (p. 158). The distinct roles of Leader/Quiz Master, Summarizer/Illustrator, and Passage/Reference Person provided students with three different perspectives of how to approach the readings that had been assigned while allowing them to use different language, based on their role assignment.

3. Implementation

Literature circles were used in two sections of an academic writing class at a private university in central Japan. The classes were mandatory academic writing classes comprised of mixed-level second year English majors. All second year students were divided into 20 sections with ten teachers taking two sections each. There were between 15-20 students per section. While the topics of the essays were coordinated, the teachers were given the freedom to instruct their students in their own manner as long as the overall goals of the writing classes were achieved. The goals of this writing class were to build on the skills that they learned in their first year writing courses. In their first year, the students took an academic writing class in which they moved from paragraph writing in the first semester to a 150-300 word five paragraph essay in the second semester. This second year class was designed to have students develop their understanding of the writing process, essay structure, and APA skills.

3.1 Class schedule

Each semester was 15 weeks long and students were required to complete three essays. Each essay had a four-lesson cycle (Table 1) which included topic introduction, brainstorming, peer editing of first drafts, teacher feedback on second drafts, and final draft submission.

Table 1: Four-week lesson cycle

Class	Class Contents
1	Topic 1- Introduction and Brainstorming
2	Topic 1- Discussion
3	Topic 1- Peer Editing of 1st Draft
4	Topic 1- Writing Skill Workshop, Submission of 2nd Draft

The lesson cycle began in the second week of classes since the first week was reserved for introductions, orientation, and a writing assessment activity. After submitting their second drafts in the fourth week of the lesson cycle, students restarted the cycle and began the next essay topic. As a result, overlap occurred, where students would be working on their third and final drafts for one essay while preparing to write the first drafts for the next essay. The final two weeks of the semester were used for writer conferencing, an in-class writing assessment, and final reflections and feedback.

3.2 Class procedure

Literature circles were used in every essay lesson cycle. The readings were assigned for homework during week one of the cycle and then used in class the following week (Table 2).

Table 2: Four-week lesson cycle with literature circles included

Class	Class Contents	Homework
1	Topic 1- Introduction and Brainstorming	Read Article A or B and do literature circle role sheet.
2	Topic 1- Discussion (Literature Circle)	Topic 1 Essay 1st Draft
3	Topic 1- Peer Editing of 1st Draft	Topic 2 Essay 2nd Draft
4	Topic 1- Writing Skill Workshop, Submission of 2nd Draft	None

The author chose two news articles (Article A and Article B) to give students background information on the essay topic. The articles were between 400-550 words and taken from various news websites. Providing appropriate material for the students fulfilled Furr's (2004) adaptation of Daniels' element of having the instructor provide appropriate material for the students. Half of the students were assigned to read one article while the other half were assigned the other article. Students were then given their literature circle roles. In a class of 18 students, this allowed for even distribution of roles (Table 3).

Table 3: Ideal literature circles role distribution

	Article A	Article B
Leader/Quiz Master	3 students	3 students
Summarizer/Illustrator	3 students	3 students
Passage/Reference Person	3 students	3 students

If there were less than 18 students in class, the author would reduce the number of Leader/Quiz Master roles. When there were more than 18 students, the author added Summarizer/Illustrator and Passage/Reference Person roles. The reasoning behind this balancing in roles is that the Leader/Quiz Master role has less development of writing skills than the other two roles, so increasing the number of Summarizer/Illustrator and Passage/Reference Person roles also increased the opportunity for students to develop their writing skills. Students were responsible for reading their article and completing their role sheet.

During the next class, the literature circle groups involved three stages. In the first stage ("Same Role Group"), the students met with the others who read the same article and performed the same role, so all Article A Leader/Quiz Masters were in one group, all Article A Summarizer/Illustrators were in another group, and all Article A summarizer and illustrators were in a group. An identical set of groups was also formed of students who read Article B. While in the "Same Role Group," students had between five to seven minutes to share their work and ideas with each other. This allowed students to check their work with their peers and make changes to their work. During this group work, the author walked around the classroom to monitor and assist students when necessary but mainly allowed students to collaborate without much teacher interference. Daniels' (1994) ninth principle for literature circles emphasizes that teachers should serve as facilitators rather than group members or instructors. In this stage, as well as the following stages, students were told that they were to read their work to their group members and not put their work down on the table for the rest of the group to copy. It was emphasized that this was a speaking and listening activity as well as a reading and writing activity.

The next stage, named "Same Reading Group," involved reforming groups of students who read the same article to include at least one Leader/Quiz Master, one Summarizer/Illustrator, and one Passage/Reference Person per group. Ideally, in a class of 18, there would be six groups, three for Article A and three for Article B. If there were too many students of one role, then having two students with the same role in one group was acceptable. If there were not enough students of one role then the author asked a student to perform the same role for two different groups.

During this stage, the Leader/Quiz Master led the discussion by welcoming everyone to the group and asking the Summarizer/Illustrator to share their role with other students by telling everyone the three key points to the article and explaining the illustration. As the summarizer was doing this, the other group members wrote the information on their Literature Circles Worksheet (Appendix B). After the summarizer finished, the Leader/Quiz Master asked the Passage/Reference Person to share the passages that he/she chose and the reasoning behind choosing them. On their role sheets, the students were given examples of how to explain their reasoning, such as the passage supports a key point on the topic, reveals surprising or new

information on the topic, or says something that they completely disagree with. The Passage/Reference Person gave examples of how to cite the article and shared the APA reference for the article, all of which the students recorded on their Literature Circles Worksheet. Finally, the Leader/Quiz Master asked the comprehension questions on his/her role sheet and the other group members wrote down both the questions and answers on their Literature Circles Worksheet. To end this stage, the Leader/Quiz Master asked the two discussion questions on the topic. This "Same Reading Group" took at least 20 to 30 minutes due to the exchange of information. As with the previous stage, the author's role was to monitor and provide assistance to students when needed. The most common request during this time was to check if the citations and references followed APA format.

The final stage, "Information Exchange," paired students so that each pair had someone who read Article A and one who had read Article B. During this stage, the pair shared the summary, passages with APA citations and references, and discussion and comprehension questions and answers with their partner. This stage allowed students to teach their partner about the article they read and gave students information on both readings. This final stage took between 20 and 30 minutes.

To wrap up the activity, the students reformed groups and discussed the questions prepared by the Leader/Quiz Masters. Students were given ten minutes to discuss the questions in their groups before coming together for a class discussion. The students were told that both Article A and B could be used as reference material for their essays. The use of literature circles was repeated for every essay cycle in the first and second semester, with the articles increasing to 550-800 words for the second semester.

4. Potential problems and benefits

A typical problem that can occur with any type of group work or collaborative learning is not having all members do their share of the work. While the assignment of different roles in literature circles can aid in this by creating a sense of responsibility to their classmates, it is important to make sure that each member clearly understands the responsibility of the role that has been assigned. Cohen and Lotan (2014) claimed that in order to ensure the effectiveness of role assignments, it is important to make the roles public knowledge to the rest of the class, rotate roles so that every member will eventually do each role, specify in great detail the responsibility of each role, and make sure all group members are clear about the responsibilities of each role. By making these principles clear to all students it helped the author reduce the number of students who failed to contribute to the group because the students realized that they could not complete their group tasks without the participation of all members.

The primary reason for using literature circles in an academic writing class was to build positive group dynamics. While this study was based on observation and not measurement, the author observed students discussing the essay topics and essay drafts more openly than in previous classes in which literature circles were not used. This occurred in group work where students did different writing workshop activities as well as before class started. A number of factors likely contributed to this, including positive group dynamics. Future studies can examine student perceptions of

writing being either a solitary or collaborative process with a pre-study questionnaire followed by a post-study questionnaire of whether the use of literature circles changed their initial perceptions.

The author also observed more engagement from students during peer response of first drafts. Unlike previous years of this writing course, students were more profuse in their comments and suggestions about their peers' essays. The feedback that students gave to the author regarding peer response was much more positive than in previous years as students claimed to find much greater value in the peer response process than classes in which literature circles were not used. Again, this is not based on formal research, but on the author's collection of student reflections and observation and a future study that measures the impact of group dynamics on peer response is needed to demonstrate the significance of these factors.

The ancillary purpose of using literature circles was to improve student's writing skills. While data was not collected about the improvement of the writing skills of the students, the author did notice that there were fewer APA mistakes among the students than in previous years. The impact of literature circles on this was not measured and this could be a result of prior student knowledge and training. Similarly, while students demonstrated improved summarization skills, this may or may not have been the result of the use of literature circles. While the author noticed improvement in these two skills, it is important to note that more research should be conducted to measure the significance.

5. Conclusions

The author has found that using literature circles in an academic writing classroom can improve the process of academic essay writing by strengthening positive group dynamics in an EFL classroom. One of the key components of literature circles is assigning different roles to students to foster a collaborative learning environment. By creating groups in which contributions from all members is necessary, cooperation is essential, and communication is open, positive group dynamics begin to form and student perceptions of writing as a solitary endeavor begin to transform into the peer-supported activity that most writers recognize it to be.

There are many aspects that are involved in building up the writing skills of EFL students and while learning grammar, voice, essay structure, and researching skills, among others, are in lessons incorporated into most writing classes, establishing a positive learning environment within a classroom can make acquiring and polishing these skills easier. The inclusion of literature circles in an academic writing class is not a substitute for teaching writing skills but an activity which fosters group dynamics while helping to develop some of the writing skills that the students have already learned about.

Using literature circles in writing classes can help to make the writing process a bit more communicative for EFL students and, as a result, allow them to understand that writing benefits from communication with others. In addition, the practice of literature circles uses the four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, so its inclusion in a writing class can help develop writing skills that are not adequately

cultivated in high school. While further study is needed, any class may benefit from the positive environment created by using literature circles.

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Appendix A
Leader/Quiz Master
Title _____

Questions about the reading:
1.   2.

Answers
1.
2.

Discussion questions:
1.   2.

Summarizer/Illustrator

Title _____

Three Key Points:
1.
2.
3.

My Picture:

Passage/Reference Person

Page/ Paragraph	Why you chose that passage
(1)	
(2)	
(3)	

APA Format

APA Reference

Appendix B
Literature Circles Worksheet- Article A
Passages

Page/ Paragraph	Why the passage was chosen

Reference

Summary of the Article
1.

2.

3.

Literature Circles Worksheet- Article B
Passages

Page/ Paragraph	Why the passage was chosen

Reference

Summary of the Article
1.

2.

3.