

Mark Furr
Yokohama City University
Yokohama, Japan
Email: markf@teachinginjapan.com

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Literature Circles for the EFL Classroom

Introduction

I feel the need to begin my paper in the same way that I started my presentation at TESOL Arabia. I must simply state that literature circles are magic. Literature circles are magic in that they have transformed my students from passive, rather shy, reticent Japanese university students into students who eagerly point at their texts in order to support their arguments while sharing their opinions *in English!*

I also feel the need to acknowledge Pam Bostelmann and the 2001 TESOL Arabia Conference in Abu Dhabi for introducing me to literature circles. Even while I was still sitting in the seminar room at the Hilton in Abu Dhabi, I knew that literature circles were something that I wanted to try with my students in Japan; thus, upon returning to Japan, I began to do some research on literature circles. As I was looking for published research concerning literature circles or literature discussion groups for EFL students, I discovered that while a great deal has been written about using literature circles in the L1 or ESL classroom in North America, very little has been written concerning using literature circles with EFL students. I then decided that if I was going to be successful using literature circles with Japanese EFL students, I would need to carefully re-examine the standard model of literature circles as developed by Harvey Daniels and adapt this model for EFL students.

While Daniels and his colleagues in Illinois first created literature circles for use in elementary and secondary classrooms in the US, I would be using this method to teach students who neither speak English in their daily lives nor read roman characters in their first language. Of course, for teachers in the Gulf, the same issues arise. Aside from the practice needed to become more fluent speakers of English, I contend that EFL students who do not read roman characters in their native language also need to work on building reading fluency as well as reading comprehension; thus, a number of the primary assumptions that were used to create literature circles for L1 learners need to be challenged if EFL teachers are to successfully appropriate this method of teaching reading and discussion skills.

Background on the Teaching of Reading and Literature in Japan

In order to understand my rationale for feeling so strongly about using literature circles with Japanese students, one needs to know a little about the traditionally accepted method for teaching both Reading and Literature in Japanese high schools and universities.

Both Reading and Literature instruction in Japan, particularly at the university level, has historically revolved around a “grammar translation” approach in which Japanese professors assign complex authentic materials to students for English-to-Japanese translation. Even in a British Literature course, for example, the entire year might be spent doing a painstaking sentence-by-sentence translation of just one canonical text (Waring & Takahashi, 2000). This approach is an extension of the general high school curriculum which also asks students to focus primarily on translation work rather than reading for more general comprehension. In other words, reading instruction at both the secondary and tertiary level in Japan is strictly “intensive;” this focus on simply “decoding” the English language creates a number of interesting phenomena for foreign professors working in Japan. First, while it is widely recognized that Japanese students are “not good at speaking English,” there seems to be a common belief that because they have done so much “reading” (translation) in high school, Japanese students are reasonably fluent readers of English; however, this is not the case. Precisely because students have *only* been exposed to text in English as something that needs to be deciphered like an algebraic formula, foreign professors find that Japanese university students have a very low level of reading fluency.

In order to combat problems created by this over emphasis on “intensive reading,” a number of Japanese university English departments have started (or are in the process of starting) “Extensive Reading Programs;” these programs are designed to allow students to gain reading fluency in English by asking them to read a great deal in English with only one caveat: all texts read in an extensive reading program should be at or just below a student’s actual reading level. In other words, different students will all be reading different materials according to their current reading ability. The idea is to get students to read something that is both interesting and *easy* for them to read. The focus is on general comprehension and reading fluency. These programs operate in a number of ways, but most often there are “Extensive Reading Libraries” from which students are free to select titles to read. These libraries usually consist of a wide range of “graded readers” from publishers like OUP, Penguin and Macmillan.

While extensive reading does offer a fairly powerful corrective to the emphasis on the “intensive” decoding of texts as described above, my recent experiments with literature circles in my Japanese university classes have proven to be successful in combining the close reading of texts (intensive reading) with fluency-building skills (extensive reading). Because Japanese students have often had very unsatisfactory encounters with reading and literature in English, using a method that simultaneously promotes general reading comprehension, reading fluency and interesting discussion, allows students to discover both that they are able to read literature in English and that it can even be a rewarding experience.

History of Literature Circles

As stated above, I have appropriated this “combined” approach to the teaching of Reading/Literature from a model of small-group learning, Literature Circles, which has gained a great deal of popularity in US elementary and secondary L1 classrooms. About fifteen years ago, a group of teachers and researchers in Chicago, led by Harvey Daniels, began to document their use of literature circles (Daniels 2002). Daniels and his colleagues decided to experiment with bringing the centuries-old tradition of adult “book clubs” or “reading groups” into elementary and secondary classes. These researchers realized that while adults had had been enjoying both reading and discussing books together for hundreds of years, when students are asked to read or study literature in a traditional school setting, the enjoyment, excitement and passion that can be found in adult reading groups is all but lost. Fortunately, the Daniels group was helped along by the enormous popularity of talk-show host Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club. About the time that Daniels and his colleagues were still launching literature circles in their Chicago classrooms, Oprah gave both reading and literature a huge boost by hosting literature discussion groups on national television in the US. Oprah’s discussion groups were comprised of selected authors and “everyday folks.” Oprah’s Book Club spawned adult book discussion groups all over the country; people were meeting all over the US in libraries, coffee shops and in their homes to talk about literature. Suddenly, it was once again “cool” to read literature and to talk about it with friends.

Daniels and his fellow teacher-researchers knew from years of experience that their L1 students would often just “go through the motions” in their Reading and Literature courses and that many students cited these courses as their “least favorite,” “most difficult,” or “most hated” courses in school. As an EFL teacher who has taught in the US, Armenia, Palau and Japan, I can certainly empathize with these teachers in Chicago. I can’t count the number of times that I have asked students to read something that I thought would be both interesting and exciting for them, only to be disappointed by a good many blank stares when I tried to lead a class discussion or to ask class members to share their thoughts about a particular story. Since I have started using literature circles at two different Japanese universities, the blank stares have disappeared. They have been replaced by students eagerly talking with each other about the stories they’ve read; referring to the text to support their arguments; asking insightful questions about their reading assignments; writing copiously in order to be ready to participate in the literature circle groups; and conducting their discussions almost solely *in English*.

L1 and EFL Literature Circles: What’s the Difference?

In *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, Harvey Daniels lists the eleven “key ingredients” for Literature Circles (18). While I have no argument with this list of essential elements for Literature Circles in L1 Language Arts classes, I believe that four of the features, which Daniels defines as the *most* crucial for successful implementation of lit. circles in L1 classes, need to be revised when used with EFL students.

First, a look at Daniel's original definition and his list of the Key Ingredients of Literature Circles:

Literature circles are small, student reading groups which will contain most of the following features:

- *1 Students *choose* their own materials.
 - *2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on book choice.
 - *3. Different groups read *different books*.
 - *4. When books are finished, *readers share with their classmates*, and then form new groups around new reading
 5. Groups meet on a *regular, predictable schedule* to discuss their reading.
 6. Students use written or drawn *notes* to guide both their reading and their discussion.
 7. Discussion *topics come from the students*.
 8. Group meetings aim to be open, *natural conversations about books*, so personal connections, digressions and open-ended questions are welcome.
 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.
- (Daniels, 2000: 18)

As you will notice, I have marked the first four of Daniel's Key Ingredients with an asterisk. I draw attention to these points because while I acknowledge that they are the central axis around which literature circles revolve for use with L1 learners, these same points are those that I contend need to be revised when using this method in EFL classrooms. As with other methods appropriated from L1 classrooms (process writing comes to mind as one example), I believe that we do EFL students a disservice by simply moving a teaching approach from the L1 to the EFL classroom without first giving careful thought to the differences in the learning needs and objectives between L1, ESL and EFL students. To return to a point mentioned earlier, for example, while EFL students who do not read in the roman alphabet need a great deal of reading fluency practice, ESL students in North America may not need nearly as much practice in this skill as they can easily transfer reading skills from their first language into English.

To conduct successful Literature Circles in the EFL classroom, I have replaced the first four of Daniels's Key Ingredients with the following:

1. Instructors select materials appropriate for their student population.
2. *Small temporary groups* are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion.
3. Different groups are usually reading the same text.

4. When books are finished, *readers may prepare a group project and/or the Instructor may provide additional information to “fill in some of the gaps” in student understanding--I call this step backloading the instruction.*

After the group projects or additional instruction, new groups are formed, based on student choice or the Instructor's discretion.

Most of the changes that I have made from the Daniels model of literature circles concern the Instructor's need to select texts at an appropriate level for our students and to set a pace that is also appropriate for EFL students. While Daniels insists that “students choose their own materials” and read at their own pace, EFL students need more guidance, not only with choosing text that is not overly difficult, but they also need guidance in choosing materials that they are able to use as a basis for discussion *in English*.

For EFL students, the core of successful literature circles is the fact they do allow students to participate in “real-life,” meaningful discussions about the texts/stories that they've read; thus, it is important for the teacher to choose materials which promote reading fluency for use in literature circles. In other words, students should be able to read Literature Circle texts without using a dictionary. While Literature Circles employ a combination of both intensive and extensive reading skills, the text itself must be material that is appropriate for *extensive* reading. A good test to discover whether a not a text is suitable for use in an EFL Literature Circle is to follow recommendations for extensive reading made by Rob Waring and Sachiko Takahashi in *The Why and How of Using Graded Readers*.

Here are some good ‘rules of thumb’ for students to find their reading level:
There should be no more than 2-3 unknown words per page.
The learner is reading 8-10 lines of text or more per minute.
The learner understands almost all of what she is reading with few pauses.
(Waring & Takahashi 2000: 11)

Remember, Literature Circles are based on the ability of our students, not only to read but also to discuss the texts in English, so the materials must be manageable.

While Daniels is adamant about allowing L1 students to choose reading materials, our students may often lack, but are interested in, some of the historical or cultural backgrounds of the stories they read. With each group reading the same stories, I can allow the students to first get hooked by the story and then sneak in a mini-lecture to the entire class after the groups have finished their discussions. For example, after my students finish reading and discussing a graded version of Kate Chopin's *Story of an Hour*, they are more than willing to listen to a mini-lecture about Chopin's life and the historical and social issues raised in the story; thus, the Literature Circle readings and discussions serve to pique the student's interest in social and cultural issues, and before they even realize it, they are constructing quite complex questions in English in order to satisfy their curiosity!

In many respects, an EFL Literature Circle does closely resemble a literature circle in an L1 classroom as I have left Daniels's last seven criteria intact. My Literature Circles do meet on a regular, predictable schedule, and I contend that this is one crucial aspect to the success of literature circles. EFL Literature circles require a good deal of student training time; thus, a teacher must be willing to commit to several *cycles* (stories) with literature circles if there are to be positive results. Again, I cannot state this too strongly, one should not even consider trying literature discussion circles as a "one off" classroom activity.

Just as in L1 literature circles, EFL students use their written notes to discuss their reading. This is the "magic" of literature circles; the Role Sheets (described in the next section below) prompt each member of a small reading group to read a story from a different perspective and to prepare for a small group discussion based on their reading. In this way, students are learning that there are both a number of different reasons for reading and varying perspectives on any given text. The Role Sheets break academic reading down into smaller sub-skills with each student in her small group closely focusing on one way of encountering the text. After each student has read the story from a given perspective (role) as homework, then the students are brought together, and through discussion, these parts become whole. When a literature circle goes well, one can easily see many EFL students operating in something akin to what Vygotsky calls the "zone of proximal development" (86); that is to say, EFL students are able to discuss issues in English and to solve problems in collaboration with their peers that they can not possibly deal with on their own. While the individual Role Sheets are fairly simple and straightforward, when they are combined in a discussion group, EFL students are able to engage in complex textual analysis and academic discussion. After the first literature circle cycle in my classes, I always give the students an anonymous post-discussion survey. One of the most common comments that I receive from students is that "I like literature circles because I feel that I can really discuss these stories in English since I know exactly what I'm supposed to talk about (do) when we discuss the stories in my group." The "magic" of the Role Sheet lies in the fact that it gives students a clear purpose for reading the story; thus, when they meet in their groups in class, students are confident that they know what they are going to talk about in their group.

As far as the last three of Daniels' Key Ingredients for Literature Circles, they are fairly self-explanatory, and I suspect, EFL literature circles differ little from their L1 counterparts in these regards. Most of the discussion topics do come from the students, and group meetings are open and digressions, personal connections and open-ended questions are encouraged. After the groups get started, the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than an instructor, evaluation is by teacher observation, and, hopefully, a spirit of fun pervades the room.

Using the Literature Circle Role Sheets with EFL Students

Finally, a look at the *magic* formula for using literature circles with EFL students. While I will briefly comment on how I have adapted each of the Literature Circle Role Sheets for use with Japanese EFL students, I've chosen to place all of the Role Sheets together in the appendix rather than to have them inserted into the text.

First, as we have seen from Daniels' definition, literature circles are small reading groups that meet in the classroom to discuss texts. These groups should be student-directed, but at the same time, our students need some tools in order to have interesting, fun discussions about the stories that they've read. These tools come in the form of the Role Sheets that students use when meeting in their groups. Daniels and his colleagues have advocated five basic roles, and I have created one new role for use with EFL students.

The first role is that of the **Group Discussion Leader** whose job is to act as a facilitator in the group and to keep the discussion flowing. The Discussion Leader is directed to read the story a number of times so that she has a very solid grasp of the possible themes and the basic plot of the story. The Discussion Leader opens the discussion with a few open-ended questions concerning the story (see example questions on the bottom of the GDL Role Sheet in the appendix), and then proceeds to call on other group members to share their findings with the group. For the first time through the literature circles with EFL students, it might be a good idea to manage the groups so that the Discussion Leaders are fairly outgoing students. I did not do this my first time using literature circles, but I did "manage" the first round of literature circles this year, and there was much less confusion with a *strong* GDL in each group. I also stress to the students that the GDL's job is *not* to be the "boss" but just to keep the conversation moving. *All students* are responsible to speak and to ask follow up questions.

The second Role is that of the **Summarizer**. I usually recommend that the summarizer present her summary early in the discussion so that everyone can remember the plot of the story. It's important to emphasize that the summarizer gives a brief but complete summary of the plot. I write that the summary should be "a one or two minute summary," but often the students take twice that long to read their summaries at first. Other students are encouraged to ask the summarizer to read her summary a second time if that will help everyone to understand the plot a little better. By paying careful attention to the plot of the story, the Summarizer is reading the story for general comprehension rather than studying literary language or devices. Many students have remarked that they really liked being the Summarizer because it forces them to read the story a number of times in order to pick out the most important points to present in their summary. Finally, because I teach an American Short Stories course, I teach students how to plot Freytag's Pyramid later in the term and then ask the Summarizer to write both a short narrative summary and to plot Freytag's Pyramid and share it with her group.

The next role, **Connector**, is one that students often say is very difficult when we first start literature circles, but by the end of the year, many students think that both completing this role and listening to their classmates as Connector, is the most interesting role. The Connectors role is to try to find connections between the text and the real world in which she lives. For example, the Connector may make connections between the thoughts, feelings or actions of characters in the story and family members, friends or classmates. Again, the Connector's role is quite challenging at first, so the teacher may want to assign this role to an outgoing student for the first round of literature circles. During class, I was amazed at some of the personal stories that my students were sharing with each other after reading a section of *The Joy Luck Club*. These students were not

only connecting with the story, they were also connecting with each other in ways that I had never witnessed in a Japanese college classroom.

The fourth role is that of the **Word Master**, sometimes called the Word Wizard or Vocabularian. While the Group Discussion Leader and the Summarizer need to read the text and prepare to discuss the story from a global standpoint, the Word Master focuses on single words or very short phrases; thus, the WM is doing a very close reading of the text. The Word Master may choose only five words which she believes to be the most important words found in a story. Some students disliked the Word Master role in my class until I told them that they should look for special uses of common words and ask their classmates, “What do you think _____ means in this situation?” Or “Why does the writer repeat the word _____ eight times in the first two pages of this story?” The Word Master is *not* confined to defining new words, but should be encouraged to look for those words that she believes are important in the story. Finally, I usually invite the WMs to come to my office and use an EFL English-to-English Dictionary to define their words in a way that the whole group can easily understand.

The last of the “traditional” roles is that of the **Passage Person**. Like the Word Master, the PP is asked to make a very close reading of the text and to look for well-written or key passages in the story. In my classes, the PP quite often chooses passages which she finds confusing and then asks the group for help in understanding the passage. Some of the best discussion occurs as the students are trying to figure out difficult passages together; it is often at this point that one can readily see the theory of the “zone of proximal development” playing out in class. In my Short Stories Class, after having studied Freytag’s Pyramid, some of the PPs choose to look for passages containing the Complication or the Climax of a story.

Finally, a role that I have created and am planning to add this year is the role of **Culture Collector**. I came up with this role in response to the number of times that students have struggled with the cultural underpinnings and historical backgrounds of some of the stories which we read. I think to have one student focus on cultural issues later in the term will add a further level of both interest and complexity to the discussions. Upon student recommendation, I may have the GDL also act as the Word Master as these roles are perceived as requiring less writing time (homework) than that of the other roles.

Finally, a look at what the students *do*, the first time that they meet (see the Reading Schedule in the appendix). Students choose (or may be assigned a role), and they complete the reading schedule in their small group. Because almost every Japanese student has a cell phone with email capability, most students exchange email addresses at the time of filling in the schedule. I tell students that even if they are absent on the day of the literature circle meeting, they still *must* have their work ready and contact another group member to read their materials to the group. In my class, I use only very short stories (5-8 pages in a graded reader), so in almost every case, students are required to read and to prepare their role for the entire story prior to the next class.

Conclusion

As I stated in the very first line of this article, I do believe that literature circles are *magic*. For EFL students, their magic works in a number of ways. First, EFL students feel as if they are having interesting, important discussions in English while participating in literature circles. I contend that because the Literature Circle Role Sheets give each group of students a set of clear, yet complex, tasks, they are able to have discussions at a far deeper level than those commonly heard in EFL classrooms which use “course books” or “discussion-based” textbooks. The *magic* lies in the fact that the sum of these Role Sheets is far more complex than any of the individual parts. Second, EFL Literature Circles are *magic* because at their heart lie something that I did not even really touch on in my paper. While this paper focused on the methodology of conducting EFL literature circles, let us not forget that at the heart of a literature circle is a great story. In all cultures, over thousands of years, people have been fascinated by a good story, and I can say from experience, that my students have been no exception. We have read stories ranging from those written by Mark Twain to little-known stories of Caribbean islanders, and in almost every case, these stories have reached students in ways that course books and other materials can not even approach. Finally, at least in the case of my Japanese first and second-year college students, literature circles have performed the magic of motivating students to read a good deal outside of class; to write copiously in order to be prepared for the group discussions; to speak in English over 90% of the time while in their groups; to eagerly point to passages within a text to support their arguments; and to question each other in order to figure out what the text really means. Is this magic? I believe so, but the only way to know for sure is to try it for yourself!

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Appendix:

Literature Circle Role Sheets

The Role Sheets in the appendix have been reduced to save space; normally they are reproduced on A4 paper when given to students for use in their discussion groups.

Name:

Story:

Group Discussion Leader:

The **Discussion Leader's job** is to

prepare several questions to start the discussion and keep the discussion lively.
make sure each group member participates in the discussion

Usually the best discussion questions come from your own thoughts, feelings, and questions as you read. Either as you read or when you have finished reading today's assignment, list some of your questions below. You may also use some of the general questions listed on the bottom of this page.

Possible discussion questions or topics for today:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

How did you feel when you were reading this?

What did you think about this reading?

Would you summarize what happened? (ask the summarizer)

What questions did you have as you were reading?

Did anything in this section of the book surprise you?

Which character in this story did you like best? Why?

What do you think will happen next? (to be used for a longer story).

Adapted from Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* 2nd Edition. Stenhouse: 2002

TESOL Arabia
Literature Circles

Name:

Story:

Summarizer Role:

The **Summarizer's job** is to give a one or two minute statement that covers the most important events in the reading. The other members of your group will be counting on you to give a summary that will remind them of the key points, the main ideas, the action that occurs in the story. You may need to read the story (or section) more than one time to give a good summary.

What is absolutely essential for everyone in the group to know about the reading? In other words, what is the most important event in this reading?

What are the key points to remember about this section? (facts/plot summary)

Adapted from Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* 2nd Edition. Stenhouse: 2002

TESOL Arabia
Literature Circles

Name:

Story:

Connector Role:

The **Connector's job** is to help group members make connections between the reading and the world outside. The Connector should think about how the story relates to his/her own experiences or to the experiences of friends or family members. Also, the Connector can talk about how this story is connected to other readings or things that they have heard about. Here are some questions to begin discussing connections between the reading and the world outside.

What has happened in your life that is similar to some of the things that are happening to the people in the story?

Do any of the characters remind you of people that you know? How? Why? Do any of the characters help you to understand the thinking of real people that you know?

Have you ever had thoughts or feelings similar to those of any of the characters in the story?

Does anything in the story remind you of something in the news or something that you have read?

Some connections I have found between this reading and other people, places, experiences, events.....

1.

2.

3.

Adapted from Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* 2nd Edition. Stenhouse: 2002

TESOL Arabia
Literature Circles
Name:

Story:

Word Master Role:

The **Word Master's job** is to look carefully through the reading and to notice the words and phrases that you do not know or are not sure about. There may be many new words for you, but part of being a good reader means that you know which words you can skip over and return to later, and which words you need to know to understand the reading. If you find words that you do not know, use a highlighter or pencil check in the margin to mark them while you are reading. Later, you may look them up in the dictionary. Please look carefully for the words that really stand out in the reading. These may be words that are repeated often, words used in an unusual way, or words that are particularly important to the meaning of the story. The **Word Master's job** is to choose 5 words (only five!) that s/he thinks are important and necessary to understand the reading and to prepare the answers to these questions for each of the five words:

Where is the word found? (page and place on the page)
What does the word mean? Explain in SIMPLE English.
How is the word used in this sentence?
Why is this word important in the reading?

Please write the words and the page numbers below, but you can use the back of the paper or notebook paper if you need more space to explain your findings.

Word	Page # and Paragraph	Explanation (definition, synonym, reason for choosing the word, etc.)
-------------	-----------------------------	--

Adapted from Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* 2nd Edition. Stenhouse: 2002

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Name:

Story:

Passage Person Role:

The **Passage Person's** job is to find and bring to the group's attention important, interesting, or difficult parts of the reading, parts that may be important for the story's events (the plot) or to explain the characters.

find and bring to the group's attention passages with especially interesting or powerful language.

A passage is usually about one paragraph, but sometimes just a sentence or two. Some possible reasons for choosing a passage to share and discuss in the group are because the passage is:

important
surprising
funny
confusing
informative
well written

The **Passage Person** may read the passage to the group or may ask someone to read it. The Passage Person should prepare the following for each passage:

**Page #& Reasons for choosing this passage
for discussion
paragraph**

Questions

_____ **1.**

_____ **2**

Adapted from Harvey Daniels' *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* 2nd Edition. Stenhouse: 2002

Name:

Story:

Culture Collector:

The **Culture Collector's** job is to look at the story and note both differences and similarities between the culture represented in the story and their own culture. For example, as a Collector, you might think about the theme of the story and talk about whether or not this theme is important in your own culture. Remember, look for both similarities and differences and try to point to specific passages in the story that clearly show the "Cultural Points" that you are collecting (please note both the page and paragraph numbers for the passages that you select). The Collector's role is similar to the Connector's, but while the Connector tries to find ways to connect the story to her own life, the Collector tries to compare and contrast the culture represented in the story with her own culture. As the Culture Collector, you can also ask questions to your group about cultural points that seem confusing to you.

Some differences and similarities between my culture and the culture represented in the story are.

1.

2.

3.

Cultural Questions

1.

2.

3.

Literature Circle Reading Schedule

Group Discussion Leader: GDL	Passage Person: PP	Connector: C
Summarizer: S	Word Master: WM	Culture Collector: CC

	1st Meeting	2nd Meeting	3rd Meeting	4th meeting	5th Meeting		
Date							
Name	Role	Role	Role	Role	Role		