

Using literature in an EFL context to teach language and culture

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how a literature course was organized in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context to help students increase critical thinking and make intercultural connections through short stories. Rather than focusing on linguistic elements through sometimes-contrived language in EFL textbooks, meaningful input was provided through the use of authentic materials. Short works of literature by both well-known and less well-known authors were the main source of input due to their length, descriptive writing styles and deep connections to various cultures. Students used all language skills to decipher the meanings in the text, as well as their knowledge and experiences to find connections with the setting, characters, themes, story plots, as well as cultural and historical references. Student reflections revealed that where there was some improvement in reading, listening and lexis, students benefitted mostly from learning how to engage more deeply with the reading material.

Key words: Literature in the L2 classroom, EFL instruction, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, reflection

Literature has been used to teach languages since the early 19th century notably in Britain and its colonies (Hall, 2005). As other methodologies such as the Grammar Translation Method became dominant, the use of literature in the language classroom waned. However, more interest has been shown since communicative practices in the L2 language classroom have become the common pedagogy. The 1980s in particular, saw a resurgence of literature being used as the source material for language learning as educators began to acknowledge the role of literature in facilitating awareness of cultural, linguistic, and cognitive/metacognitive skills (Brumfit &

Carter, 1986; Maley, 1989; McKay, 1982; Short, 1989). More recently, a collection of chapters by Teranishi, Saito & Wales (2015), which examined how literary texts can be incorporated into the EFL classroom, showed that its benefits are becoming more recognized in the Asian EFL context. This current study was, in its own context, particularly important at this time as the university in which it was conducted was in the midst of curricular change. That is, a change was being made from a sole focus on language skills to focusing on more authentic materials to raise awareness of language and culture. As an instructor in the Faculty of Languages and Cultures, using short stories was considered an appropriate choice of materials to increase cultural awareness through language as well as provide quality yet challenging content while staying within the curricular goals of the university.

The merits of using literature in the EFL classroom are numerous and have been proven empirically to be an effective mode of instruction. For this study, the researcher focused on three main areas to enhance communicative skills and develop students' literary competence: language, culture and metacognition. With regard to language, as short stories contain real examples of grammatical structures and common expressions, learners' awareness of the diversity of the target language is raised. Based on the previously cited studies, it was felt that using literature had the potential to advance students' proficiency levels. That is, not only do students come into contact with authentic language, but also through analysis of the literary work they are able to understand different writing styles and how word use directs the reader to feel emotion (Carroli, 2008; Collie & Slater, 1990; Frantzen, 2002; Murdoch, 2002; Ur, 1996). Literature can also provide the learner with insight into various cultures – about the characters in the story, as well as their customs. This enables learners to examine their own culture and reinterpret works based on this new information (Arens & Swaffar, 2000; Collie and Slater, 1990; Dupuy, 2000; Swaffar, 1999). Asking students to establish connections between their own community and the environments and situations they are introduced to in the short stories has the possibility of opening doors to intercultural understanding (Bibby, 2014b; Carter & Long, 1991). Concerning metacognitive awareness, literature on many levels works as an agent of change in helping to adjust attitudes, perceptions and existing beliefs (Carter & Long, 1991). As students increase their awareness of language and appreciation of various cultures, it was felt that they could be

more critical in their thinking. In addition, by connecting different aspects of the story with personal experiences, critical thinking would be further encouraged.

This paper illustrates how a literature course was organized in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context to help students improve their critical thinking and make intercultural connections through short stories. Meaningful input was provided through the use of authentic materials from mostly classic American authors rather than focusing on the current choice of textbooks at the university that featured mainly inauthentic reading passages. The 14-week course design is described to show the literary elements students were expected to identify and discuss for their mid-term and final examinations. The paper first explains the research background, and then describes the curriculum designed for a class of 25 mixed-level second year students. The course design, including stories chosen for the course is then presented and the paper concludes by highlighting potential challenges when teaching a literature course to a mixed-level class of EFL students and offering suggestions by students and the researcher for a course to be conducted successfully to meet the needs of mixed-level EFL students.

Research context

The study is situated in a national university in Japan in an elective Oral Communication class consisting of 25 mixed-level second year students in the field of engineering. Even though the course was an elective course, it was mandatory for students to take one of the elective courses offered in the curriculum to obtain the necessary credits for graduation. Based on responses from the reading self-evaluation done in the first class, many students selected the course mainly because the class time fit within their schedule rather than due to any enjoyment of reading or an appreciation of literature. Of the 25 students, only one admitted to reading (in his L1) as a fun pastime activity. As such, motivational levels for reading and speaking were, in most cases, average at best and needed to be sparked throughout the course.

Two separate literature courses were developed. The first course was taught to 25 mixed-level students in the Engineering Department. In this course, students were introduced to literary elements of a short story, which culminated in a 15-minute group discussion about a text. The second course, building on previous skills, was an intensive reading course aimed at more advanced students. The goal of this course was to conduct a comparative literature study of the

primary reading and an additional work chosen by the student. This paper, however, focuses on the first course to help demonstrate to instructors of mixed-level, L2 students how authentic literature can be used with students coming from a non-English educational major with different language proficiency levels.

Each week, the students were given a new short story to read. They were challenged to participate actively in discussions by analyzing more critically each story, comparing stories to each other as they completed activities on the different literary elements. This aimed to further deepen the cognitive processing as students advanced from answering basic referential questions to questions that required more thought and analysis. The teacher initially provided questions to teach the basic elements of a short story (Figure 1, numbers 1-3). However, by the end of the course, after three weeks of discussion training, students were able to ask more challenging questions (Figure 1, numbers 4 & 5).

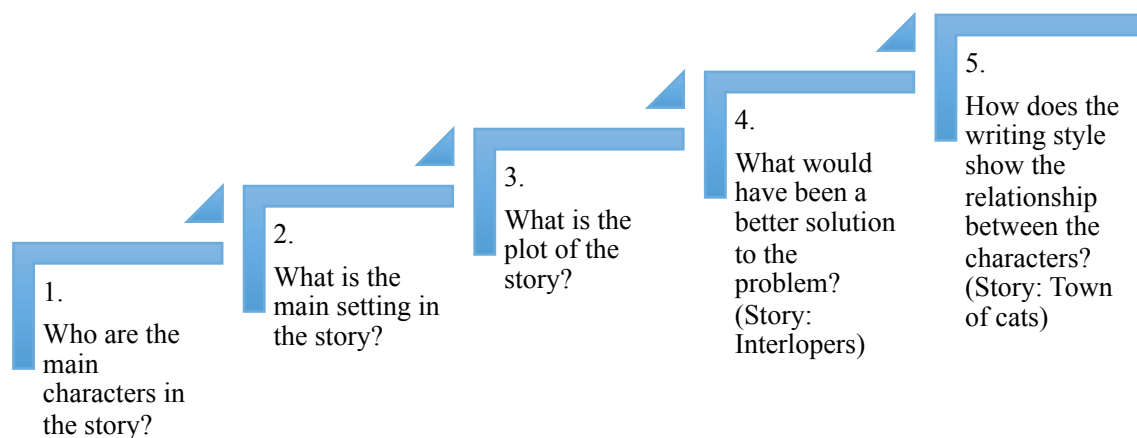


Figure 1. Advancing from referential type to inferential type questions

Presentations were completed each week to check students' understanding of the stories and depth of analysis. During the mid-term group presentation, students had two minutes each to present one aspect of a literary work (such as context, theme or characterization), ask the class two critical thinking questions to facilitate discussion and then monitor the class as they discussed the questions. The final 15-minute group discussion on a story chosen by the students (see Appendix A) demonstrated their ability to discuss a story in English using the literary elements taught (see Figure 3) as well as make connections to previously discussed stories.

Rationale for using literature in the language classroom

The university in which this research took place has been recently going through an expansive restructuring of the curriculum in which content-based courses were required to be taught in English to students from their second year onward. Teachers were given the freedom to develop courses in any format they desired, as long as it met the expectations of teaching language and culture through content. Figure 1 is an illustration of the aims of the new curriculum (Yasuda, 2014, p. 106). As shown in the figure, ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) aimed to build on academic knowledge gained in the first year in a discipline or profession-specific genre.

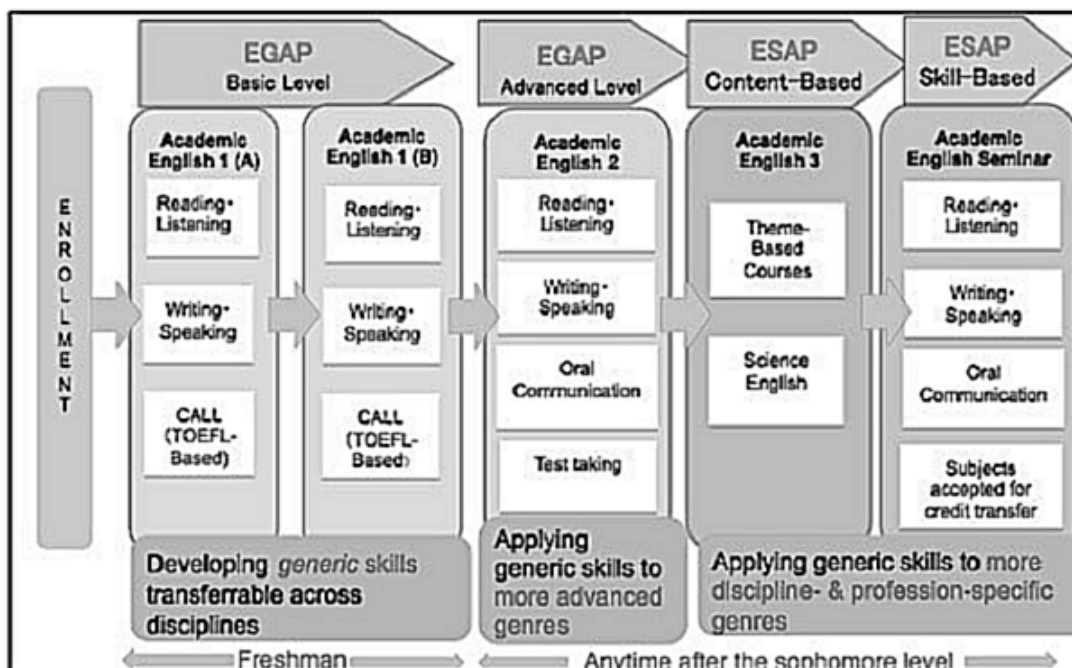


Figure 2. Overview of the Q-LEAP structure: From EGAP to ESAP

Literature was chosen as the discipline-specific genre with the central aim of fostering critical thinking skills, as well as exposing students to intercultural texts and values, which would hopefully help them to operate with more sensitivity in an international environment. Based on background research, the short story was thought guided the instructor throughout the course.

Table 1. Rationale for using short stories in a language-based curriculum

Criteria	Rationale
Authentic material	Language intended for native speakers as opposed to sometimes contrived texts with an unnatural focus on syntax as found in some traditional teaching materials
Creative use of language	Linguistic and stylistic features of a short story do not necessarily fit within the rules taught in traditional teaching materials
Realistic view of cultural/historical situations	Literary works offer a new world, which emphasizes different time periods, locations and customs. It also helps student to critically reflect on and examine their own culture and history
Length	Varying between 1,000-4,000 words, short stories can be read quickly in one sitting (usually between 1-2 hours)
Focused on a single event or theme	Short stories can maintain interest at a higher level than longer stories with more complex plot development
Limited number of characters	Short stories usually have 2-3 characters which is easier to follow as opposed to numerous characters often found within a novel
Critical thinking	Students can go beyond surface meaning of answering simple comprehension questions to achieving deeper underlying meanings through analysis
Enhance communicative skills	Age appropriate discussions on literary concepts rather than a focus on mere daily conversation practice.
Language awareness	Students are able to develop all 4 skills – reading, writing, speaking, listening – as well as understand the norms of language use and writing techniques
Flexibility	Short stories can be adapted to suit a class of mixed-level students

These criteria have been employed by many other researchers utilizing short stories in the classroom to teach language and culture (see for example, Oster, 1989; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Murdoch, 2002; Bibby & McIlroy, 2013; Bibby, 2014a). Indeed, the benefits of using literature in the EFL classroom to teach language and culture seem to far outweigh the disadvantages.

Teaching model

A model was designed as a visual aid to help students understand the course design and expectations. The researcher's model of instruction was based on Maley's (1989) approach to teaching literature. This included a focus on literary elements of a text such as setting, characterization, plot, theme and narrator's point of view (see Figure 3). This approach ensured that students had knowledge of literary conventions necessary to give an effective presentation and participate in group discussion. Group presentations were used to show understanding of text and critical elements of a story.

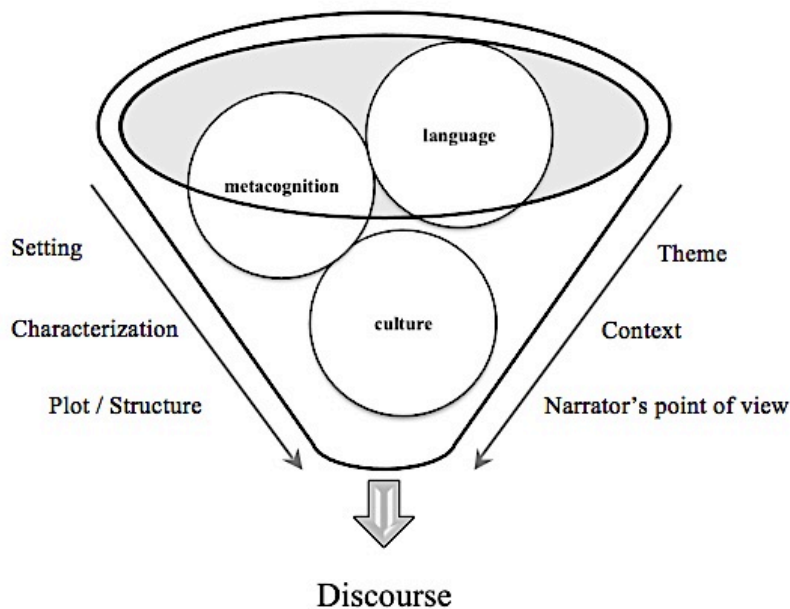


Figure 3. Literary elements of a short story enhancing discourse

In the group discussions, students were given five roles adapted from the Oxford Bookworms Club Stories for Reading Circles series (Furr, 2009):

1. The Moderator (Providing context and guiding questions)
2. The Summarizer (Giving an overview of characters, setting and plot)
3. The Dictionary (Introducing interesting vocabulary and writing style)
4. The Collector (Collecting cultural references throughout the text)
5. The Connector (Connecting elements of the story to personal experiences and/or life within Japan)

Students were asked to prepare for every role, but were assigned responsibility for only one during the group discussion. The hope was that this would give the students more tools to help sustain an effective discussion.

Course overview

Table 2 is a description of the weekly plan, including story selection, activity and examination type.

Table 2. Course overview of the 14-week curriculum

Week	Story selection	Activity
1	Course overview	Getting to know you activity/reading habits questionnaire/self-evaluation
2	The cask of Amontillado (Poe)	Setting
3	A White Heron (Jewett)	Characterization
4	The Gift of the Magi (O. Henry)	Plot and structure
5	Time (Murray)	Narrator's Point of View
6	The Interlopers (Saki)	Theme
7	Preparation for group presentation	
8	Mid-term: 10-minute Group Presentation	
9	The Last night of the World (Bradbury)	Guided Discussion (teacher)
10	Hills Like White Elephants (Hemingway)	Guided Discussion (teacher)
11	Student choice (Appendix A)	Guided Discussion (student)
12	Student choice (Appendix A)	Guided Discussion (student)
13	Preparation for group discussion	
14	Final: 15-minute Group Discussion	

As can be seen in the course design, the course progressed from basic to more advanced skills, leading up to the 10-minute group presentation in week 8. Activity types to match levels of difficulty were for example:

- Basic: 5Ws & 1H (what, who, where, when, why, how) referential type questions
- Intermediate: Reorder sentences in the story to make a summary
- Advanced: Fill in a table with key points from the story and inferential type questions

In the second half of the course (weeks 9-14), students were guided by the teacher during initial group discussions. In the first discussion, the teacher took the role of moderator. Students were given a worksheet to prepare for homework and in the following class, as they discussed their role, the teacher monitored each group and then wrote key points from student discussions on the board (Appendix B). This way, the students were able to learn from each group as well as become aware of other points they might have missed. Following this, they were directed to take on more independent leadership roles and participate actively in discussions with less teacher

input. Rather than the teacher selecting all the stories for the course, students were encouraged to decide on a story in English that they were familiar with to use for the final discussion. A discussion rather than a second presentation was considered to be more effective in showcasing depth of knowledge and understanding of literary elements.

Reflections on the course

Towards the end of the semester, students were asked to write a short reflective paragraph on changes to their approach to reading and discussing literary works as well as any challenges in the course. The teacher used this information to review class goals and make changes in order to improve students' capacity to hold longer discussions in English.

Successes

The course was seen as largely successful in that students were able to discuss a story more critically using the elements taught (Figure 3). There were three key factors that made the researcher feel that the desired outcomes of the course had been achieved – increased language skills, increased knowledge of cultures and increased higher-order thinking skills:

Language skill development

Although small, there were some improvements in speaking, listening and reading skills over the duration of the semester. With regard to speaking and listening, students were able to maintain communication over longer periods of time during final discussions compared to the start of the course when they were unfamiliar with the literary elements of a text. Through literary analysis and meaningful dialogue each week about the short stories, students came to be able to express their ideas using examples from the literary work. In the freshman EAP courses, identifying main and supporting ideas was one of the skills taught and students were able to apply it to their reading and discussion of the stories. As students recycled vocabulary and sentence structures from the readings, they demonstrated that they were able to reconstruct the story using their improved lexical base. Below are extracts from student reflections:

- *It is difficult to exchange my opinion in English, because I don't speak English well. But I think my skill of speaking English is better than last year.*

- *I learned to read stories well, for example speedy and efficiently and discuss about them each other.*
- *I become interested in English stories, perhaps because my ability of English reading is improved.*

Development of cultural awareness

Short stories provide meaningful content which can help students to become more culturally aware. In general, students were able to think more critically about each story by making cultural comparisons to characters, various items found in the stories or even weather patterns. In “The cask of Amontillado” for example, many students were excited to make a connection between the wine and sherry talked about to the different parts of France. By doing research, they could compare the quality of alcohol and winemaking regions in the story to the highest quality sake-making regions in Japan. It was most rewarding to hear students connecting, comparing and expounding upon Japanese cultural expectations with those found in the stories. Although difficult for them, students tried to discuss stereotypes of characters from other cultures found in the stories (such as the ongoing feuding in “The Interlopers”) and compare it to their perception of Japanese characteristics and cultural norms (that is, the image of the peaceful Japanese). This recognition illustrated the benefit of short stories in helping students to critically examine and understand their world from a different viewpoint. Below are extracts from student reflections:

- *I always try to make cultural connections with the stories, but sometimes the point is difficult to express. I can talk about this point better than other students.*
- *First time I read the “hills like white elephants,” I found it difficult to notice the true meaning of the story...In this story, elephants imply the baby, so she want to have a baby. I can connect the culture between that time and nowadays.*
- *I learned about wine from France and Spain. Wine is interesting.*

Metacognitive development

By developing a stronger literary competence, students were able to become more critical and analytical thinkers. That is, students were able to move from a surface understanding to more deeply understanding various aspects of the story through connecting with the characters and plot on a personal level and reflecting on cultural elements. In particular, as students were not prolific readers as stated in the self-evaluation questionnaire they completed at the start of the course, they came to understand how to read a story with more depth instead of noticing only the events as they unfolded. This was especially evident as students engaged in discussion through the five group discussion roles. Below are extracts from student reflections:

- *It was the first time to read literary books. I didn't know any books. I can get meaning faster.*
- *I can think more deeply now about story, understanding setting, structure and so on.*

Before I took this class, I used to read lots of stories, but I rarely think further. Now, I look for passages that are interesting or unusual. I like think about questions for my classmates. Furthermore, I connect with the characters' thoughts and feelings. I also connect the story and real life. Since the society changes, the differences between story and real life can make me understand deeply

Challenges

Although students seemed to appreciate the novelty of learning literature in the language classroom, there were two main difficulties. First, students could not cope with slang, regional dialects and dated English found within some texts. Although this may support the argument for using textbooks with inauthentic language, the instructor found that it added a new dimension to discussions about language. With larger numbers of students in a class or with lower-proficiency learners, this might be more challenging for teachers. In this case, using literary work with simpler, conversational style text (such as Hemingway) is an option in order for the students to cope better with the language.

Second, the speed at which students were required to read the short stories and prepare for discussions in the following class was too fast with the longer stories. In a one-credit course,

the study load outside of class cannot be too heavy, thus stories need to be simple and easy to read so that students are able to get the gist quickly. Many students found stories over 1,500 words difficult to read in one week on top of their regular departmental study load. For instructors of such a course, a more effective use of class time would be to get students participating in deeper discussion about elements of the story rather than doing comprehension checks. With longer, challenging stories, time better spent critically reflecting on the story was cut to respond to basic questions about the plot or vocabulary.

Student suggestions

Students were asked to give each other advice on how they could improve discussion skills. The following are their suggestions:

- Read the story!
- Before class, check words and how to express them
- Practice speaking about the story by yourself in English
- Join in the discussion actively
- Listen to others' opinions
- Don't speak in Japanese
- Think about the theme
- Be friends with Google
- Pick up important points. Don't read too slowly.
- Talk with many people
- Speak even if your grammar is not correct

Teacher suggestions

Below are a few basic recommendations that the researcher would suggest to teachers interested in introducing a literature program in an EFL context in the language classroom:

- Do a self-awareness activity at the outset of the course to check students' knowledge of classic authors and literary works; personal reading preferences; and motivational

level for reading, so that students are more familiar with their own and their classmates' reading habits as well as their capacity to successfully complete the course.

- Choose materials carefully. It is important that reading materials match the level of the students and their interests. The initial readings should be more straightforward in order to avoid overwhelming students.
- Have students choose authors they are familiar with for group discussion, so that they can participate more freely.
- Model a clear presentation for students so that they know what is expected of them far in advance. This would result in fewer misunderstandings about what to do during finals.
- Have students practice presentations in every class in order to get them accustomed to using the language of the short stories as well as speaking in front of their classmates.
- Prepare guiding questions in every class to facilitate critical thinking and promote cultural awareness.
- Ensure that the margins are wide enough for glossing. Students found the vocabulary support useful and helped them to prepare better for class.
- Toward the end of class, leave about ten minutes to give a brief overview of the next story to be discussed and to respond to student questions about the story or course.

This list is not exhaustive and presents only the central points which teachers can use as a guideline when creating a course.

Conclusion

One of the main concerns in EFL classrooms is the lack of authenticity of teaching materials, which can put students at a disadvantage when faced with real world situations. Using literature in the classroom is one of the methods to overcome this challenge. In short, literary

texts become the language through which students can experience real world situations as viewed through the stories. Language courses at most universities are divided according to academic skill. Although this has worked as an easy method of designing curricula, if institutions are serious about developing students who can think critically about their learning, more classes that introduce authentic materials and engage students in discussion about real events will be required. Not only can literature be used to meet the standard requirements of teaching four skills, it adds a new dynamic with its cultural and historical connections. Consequently, immersing students into the world of literature helps them to acquire skills needed to become more critical thinkers about languages and cultures. Further research that critically assesses the effectiveness of the course would be a useful next step to provide evidence that administrators could use to decide if literary studies in the classroom could be a feasible addition to the new curriculum.

To conclude, using literature in the classroom is well rooted in pedagogy since it has been shown to develop language and reasoning skills (see Teranishi, Saito & Wales, 2015). Unmodified language texts in the classroom may be highly demanding for both students and teachers who may not be familiar with this type of discipline-based genre or have the appropriate background knowledge; however, the ability of short stories to facilitate awareness of language, promote student understanding of different cultures students might encounter outside the classroom and encourage critical thinking should be three determining factors to promote the inclusion of literature into any existing curricula. As this study showed, even non-English major students with little interest in reading for pleasure can learn the basic skills of literary criticism and engage in active discussion. Further, they can gain an understanding that stories are more than just characters and a plot, but rather a world where there is deep-seated meaning waiting to be uncovered.

Author Note

Matthew Armstrong holds an MA in Curriculum Development and has taught at Kyushu University in Japan since 2006. His research interests are Literature in the L2 classroom, Peer-review in Academic Writing, Learner Psychology and Curriculum Development. He is currently conducting an action research, which helps students to transition from writing short five-paragraph academic essays to longer comparative literature reports.

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Appendix A: Stories chosen by students

Stories selected by students	Theme	Comparison
The Little Prince " <i>Little Prince Hoshi no Ojisama to Watashi</i> " (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)	The meaning of life	The Last Night of the World (Ray Bradbury)
Castle in the Sky " <i>Tenkū no Shiro Rapyuta</i> " (Hayao Miyazaki)	Love	The Gift of the Magi (O. Henry)
Princess Mononoke " <i>Mononoke-hime</i> " (Hayao Miyazaki)	Nature	The White Heron (Sarah Orne Jewett)
The Second Bakery Attack " <i>Panya saishugeki</i> " (Haruki Murakami)	Bad decisions	The Interlopers (Saki)
Town of Cats " <i>in ichi kyuu hachi yon</i> " (Haruki Murakami)	Relationships and communication	Hills Like White Elephants (Ernest Hemingway)

Appendix B: Discussion preparation worksheet and discussion points on board

Discussion	Discussion points	Notes/Examples/Thoughts
<p>The Moderator</p> <p>1. <u>Start</u>: Context: Background information of the author</p> <p><u>End</u>: Discussion Questions</p>	<p>Author's name Country</p> <p>Birth and Death Writing genre Famous story</p> <p>Something interesting about his/her life</p> <p>Questions for discussion</p>	
<p>The Summarizer</p> <p>2. Overview of the plot of the story</p>	<p>1) <u>Exposition</u>: Setting (Time, place and characters)</p> <p>2) <u>Complication</u>: (An important event)</p> <p>3) <u>Rising action</u>: (what happens next?)</p> <p>4) <u>Climax</u> (The high point)</p> <p>5) <u>Falling Action/Resolution</u> (what happens in the end?)</p> <p>6) <u>Theme</u> (The story's message)</p>	<p>1)</p> <p>2)</p> <p>3)</p> <p>4)</p> <p>5)</p> <p>6)</p>
<p>The Dictionary</p> <p>3. Interesting vocabulary or writer's style of writing</p>	<p><u>Narrator</u>: "I" subjective or "He/She/It" objective</p> <p><u>Style</u>: Conversational / Descriptive / Short and Simple / Long sentences</p> <p><u>Tone</u>: Positive / Negative</p> <p><u>Interesting words/expressions</u> and why you liked it/them</p>	
<p>The Culture Collector</p> <p>4. Cultural and/or historical references</p>	<p>Find cultural or historical connections in the story. Connect them to your country</p>	
<p>The Connector</p> <p>5. Connection to Japan or personal connection to story</p>	<p>Look for a connection to your personal life or current event in Japan</p>	

Hills Like White

① The Moderator
 1899-1961 (suicide)
 US writer Shotgun
 story (1926) between WWI & II
 worked as ambulance driver - saw horrible things
 His writing can be dark sometimes
 "The Old Man and the Sea"

② The Summarizer

Argument: Do it? Don't do it?
 "fine"
 "please please"
 "I'll scream"

Exposition: American Couple, Train station Barcelona, hot day, Drinking beers, Argue.

Complication: she is pregnant, Have abortion?

Rising Action: "fine"

Climax: "I'll scream"

Resolution: Train is coming, talking action, continue drinking

Theme

Sadness
 drinking to avoid problems
 relationship
 Communication
 death? (abortion)

Elephants (Hemingway)

③ The Dictionary
 burden/weight
 A "white" elephant = ? baby?
 The elephant in the room = ?

p. 46 "once they take it away, you never get it back"
It's finished
 p. 47 "white in the sun and the country was brown and dry"
 ↓
 p. 46 Across on the other side, were fields of grain and trees

④ The Culture Collector

Language - das 2
 p. 44 cervezas (beer)
 Alcohol Anis del Toro (tastes like liquorice)
 Money reales

gummy pure gummy
 salty sweet bitter sour kind of hard
 candy

Japan salary man / drink at train station