

Does Literature Stimulate Learners' Thinking Skills? A Comparison of Two Pilot Lessons¹⁾

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I. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Literary texts have been undervalued in Japan's educational system because they are believed to have no practical use. One striking instance of this attitude is the manner in which literature is being taught in the Japanese language classroom. The new high school curriculum (to be implemented in the 2022 school year) will keep literary texts out of mainstream Japanese textbooks. In future, textbooks used to teach Japanese will focus on writing that serves a practical purpose—this includes passages from instruction manuals and contracts and material that is accompanied by diagrams. This “purge of literary texts” has already taken place in the sphere of English education in Japan; since 1990, there has been a strong tendency toward communicative and practical English. Most high school English textbooks these days do not contain literary content, since it is believed that literature does not build proficiency in the kind of English that is required for practical use. On the other hand, English teachers in Japan likely consider language-learning to be simply “a part of *training*” (Widdowson, 1982: 204) students in the acquisition of four language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Thus, like Widdowson, “we murmur wistfully, it [language learning] should also have something to do with *education* as well?” (Widdowson, 1982: 204). We might likewise wonder if literature is indeed useful for a learner, not only when it comes to reading but also when it comes to thinking deeply in the English classroom.

Out of the four skills that English-language “education” (and not “training”) is meant to develop, the authors have chosen to focus on reading and how literary texts can help learners cultivate insight into what they are reading. Thus, there are two

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factors to consider in this research: a) the nature of the literary text and b) how it is linked to a greater capacity for understanding and a more profound thought process. Literary texts involve the learner (or reader) in the creation of a fictional world—a process requiring them to use their word-based ability to reason. When learners read, it is the words on each page that they rely on to construct the context of a given literary text (Gajdusek, 1988; Leech and Short, 2007). During this process, the learner gradually interprets what a given word, phrase, or sentence signifies—whether literally or figuratively—by referring to external sources of information (literary conventions, cultural and historical knowledge, their own experiences) that might help them to better understand the fictional world (Rosenblatt, 1995). These cognitive processes can be emphasized and contained in English “education” with the assistance of literary texts; in other words, literature should play an active part in English education (Kudo and Sugimura, 2019a).

For the pilot lesson, the authors had to select literary texts that would stimulate the cognitive process. This called for a text containing ambiguous words and phrases, one that effectively employs figurative and symbolic language. The length of the text is also a critical factor. Learners must pay attention to the words that make up a text, even as they return repeatedly to the same text, because close readings lead to close consideration. Therefore, it should be of moderate length. A text of approximately 1,000 words or so seems especially well suited to the target student audience: science majors at the university level. In terms of the plot, the text should be open-ended—open to more than one interpretation. The reader will transform this open text into a closed one, even if it does not express its end clearly, as that is the nature of the reading process. This process is characterized by a cycle of “literary observation” and linguistic review (Leech and Short, 2007). The authors chose a short story written by Ernest Hemingway, “Cat in the Rain.” This text has a very simple prose style, without any unnecessary adjectives, which the narrator uses to describe a situation or a character’s feeling. The reader must trace each character’s psychological trajectory.

Every reader understands and interprets each story in their own unique way. After each student has read and interpreted the story for themselves, they share their thoughts with each other in the discussion group—this allows them to correct any misreading and helps them develop their reading abilities. Prior to the pilot lesson, the students are instructed to read “Cat in the Rain” and to answer a series of questions in the worksheet they have been given. In class, they discuss the story with reference to the ideas and opinions they articulate in their worksheets; after this, they reflect on

their own experiences.

1.2 Previous Lessons Utilizing Literary Texts

Starting in 2015, one of the authors has taught one 90-minute lesson each semester, utilizing literary texts, that typically consists of three phases: 1) pre-lesson, which requires students to read a literary text and respond to a list of questions outside of class; 2) the actual lesson, where students discuss their interpretation of the text, and their evaluation of the story within the framework of the assignments they have had to complete in advance; and 3) post-lesson, where students reflect on their discussion experiences with their peers. While these trial lessons were very well received by the students, according to Kudo and Sugimura (2019a), 36.7% of the students who had participated in the pilot lesson in 2016 felt that they had not needed any additional logical and critical thinking skills to accurately comprehend the meaning of the literary work. Kudo and Sugimura (2019a) argue that this is because the group discussions were quite accommodating; most of the students' opinions and ideas went unchallenged and were accepted as "right," which might have made them feel like "every answer is OK." Since students are typically expected to find the one "right" answer in their regular classes, this seems like a "logical" response. The students also tended to agree with their peers, which may have prevented them from participating in more lively, controversial discussions. The students' reflective comments proved useful to the authors because they revealed that the students had been actively involved in their tasks. What they did not reveal is what exactly the students had discussed and how they had discussed it.

The authors therefore conducted another study to better understand what the students had discussed and how. This involved conducting a pilot lesson, transcribing the group discussions and analyzing each student's utterances (Kudo and Sugimura, 2019b). To analyze the discussion transcripts, the authors employed a method of qualitative analysis that was initially developed by Hanauer (2001). It consisted of nine categories of analysis, to which they added five of their own (Kudo and Sugimura, 2019b). Hanauer's (2001) description of each category—referred to as a 'code'—is summarized in Table 1; Kudo and Sugimura's (2019b) descriptions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. Hanauer's (2001) nine codes and their definitions

| Code | Definition |
|--|---|
| 1) Noticing | An utterance in which the speaker directs her and her partner's attention to a specific aspect of the text E.g. "Look here it says 'you've touched her perfect body' but here it says 'he touched your perfect body' see." |
| 2) Questioning | An utterance in which the speaker asks a question relating to a section or aspect of the poem. E.g. "Is there another meaning of mirror?" |
| 3) Interpretive hypothesis | An utterance in which the speaker proposes a new option for understanding specific sentences, lines, clauses, or words of the poem, unclear connections, unclear references or answers to questions that have been posted. E.g. "That means that only people in very difficult state are looking for salvation." |
| 4) Re-statement of an interpretive hypothesis | An utterance in which the speaker confirms a previously stated interpretive hypothesis. This re-statement is a repetition of a previously stated understanding of a section or aspect of the poem. |
| 5) Counter statement of an interpretive hypothesis | An utterance in which the speaker opposes a previously stated interpretive hypothesis and/or proposes a counter understanding. E.g. One participant proposed the interpretive hypothesis that "he is a sailor, he brought the tea and oranges with him from this trip." The other participant negates this interpretive hypothesis with the following statement, "He didn't bring her anything, it says so." |
| 6) Elaborative statement of an interpretive hypothesis | An utterance in which the speaker repeats and then elaborates on a previously stated interpretive hypothesis. E.g. One participant proposes the interpretive hypothesis that the poem "is a religious poem." The other participant elaborate on this idea by stating, "Yes, it is trying to tell us that in everyone is something divine." |
| 7) World knowledge | An utterance in which the speaker presents general knowledge from her long-term memory as a response to an interpretive hypothesis, a specific section of text or in answering a question that has been posted. |
| 8) Integrating knowledge | An utterance that connects two previously stated utterances and thereby produces a new and more comprehensive interpretation of the poem or a section of it. |
| 9) General statement | An utterance in which the speaker makes a personal comment not directly connected to the analysis of the poem or sections of it. |

Note. This table, which was created by the authors, is based on Hanauer's model (2001: 303-306).

Table 2. Five additional codes and their definitions by Kudo and Sugimura (2019b)

| Code | Definition |
|------------------------------|---|
| 10) Confirming information | An utterance to confirm the information stated earlier and/or to ask for information to be repeated. This category was specifically added to distinguish from Code 2 “Questioning” by Hanauer. E.g. “Did you say this is correct?” |
| 11) Facilitating discussion | An utterance in which the speaker uses back-channeling to facilitate a discussion. E.g. “And then?” “Really?” |
| 12) Agreeing / empathizing | An utterance to show empathy and/or concur with someone else’s opinion E.g. “I understand what you mean.” |
| 13) Sharing prepared answers | An utterance in which the speaker explains their written responses. |
| 14) Unclear statement | An utterance that the authors were unable to transcribe because of the volume of a particular speaker’s voice and/or the noise in the classroom. |

The previous study resulted in two major findings. First, some questions a) are more likely to lead to discussions that are dynamic and engaging, and b) have the potential to foster logical and critical thinking skills. The ensuing group discussions did not last as long as the authors had anticipated. Codes 6, 7, and 8 are important because the utterances they represent require the ability to reason, and to use logical and critical thinking. However, none of the utterances could be assigned these codes. This is partly because the students spent more time sharing the answers they had worked on for their pre-lesson assignment. This took up 40 to 45 percent of the time allocated for five out of six groups. Another possibility is that some of the questions were unclear, which prevented some of the students from diving into the discussions.

Second, it became apparent that the group leader’s role was a crucial one, because other members of the group came to depend on him/her as a leader. The leader’s ability to facilitate discussions can have a huge impact (Kudo and Sugimura, 2019b). The group leaders, in turn, made extensive use of the flowchart that the instructor had prepared for them, to help facilitate the group discussion process.

Although students were actively engaged in discussing the varied interpretations of the story with their peers, it became clear that some questions needed to be carefully amended to encourage a more active discussion, which is what fosters higher-order thinking skills. The authors therefore reworked the a) assignment questions, b) tasks to be

completed during the group discussion, and c) flowchart for the group leader to refer to.

II. Purpose

The purpose of the current study is twofold: 1) to learn if there were changes in the students' utterances during the group discussion following a review of the three-phrase lesson that preceded it; and if so, 2) what change(s) were observed—especially if any of the students made remarks indicating that the discussions might have stimulated their logical and critical thinking skills and that they could lead to more active discussions.

The ultimate goal of the studies we have been conducting has been to generate lesson material that can foster thinking skills; that consists of a range of literary texts meant for teachers who are non-literature majors; and that does not require any specific knowledge of, and/or background in, literature.

III. Methodology

To see if the modified lesson contributed to more stimulating discussions, the authors employed the same methodology that they had utilized previously in 2017 (Kudo and Sugimura, 2019b). This would allow them to compare the respective study results.

3.1 Participants

The lesson utilizing “Cat in the Rain” was conducted in a reading course in the fall of 2018. There were approximately 25 students in each class, and the same lesson was conducted in two classes; a total of 52 students participated. The reading course is a required unified class for science majors. The students in this course typically read science-based texts intensively and are given opportunities to read extensively; this includes graded readers that they are assigned as homework.

3.2 Instruments

To properly analyze exactly what was said during each 30-minute group session, all the student group discussions were recorded. The study objective was explained to the students; they could then choose to be recorded or not. They were also told clearly that whether they chose to join the study or not, it would not affect their grades. All the students decided to participate. Employing the same procedure used previously, two groups were chosen from each class, and a total of four group discussions were transcribed. Then, the content of each utterance was carefully examined and assigned

to one of Hanauer's (2001) nine codes and one of Kudo and Sugimura's (2019b) five codes (see Tables 1 and 2). The length of each remark was also measured. Furthermore, students' worksheets (assigned as pre-lesson homework); their discussion notes if they were available; and any reflective comments or observations after the lesson, were reviewed to better understand how the students interpreted the literary work and what they had discussed.

3.3 Procedures

Two weeks before the lesson, the students were given a literary text ("Cat in the Rain") with the title and author's name intentionally omitted, along with a list of English terms and their Japanese equivalents, and an assignment worksheet, which had a list of revised tasks and questions to be done as homework (see Appendix). The students were also instructed: 1) bring their own ideas to class, as many of the questions did not require one "correct" answer, and 2) prepare for whole-class and small-group discussions that they would join two weeks later.

During the pilot lesson, the students were divided into the same small groups of three or four that they had been working in since the beginning of the year. Each group was assigned a leader to facilitate the group discussion, previous research having shown that group leaders play a crucial role in ensuring a successful group discussion. Each leader was instructed to encourage everyone to speak, to ask fellow members for evidence and/or for reasons to support their interpretations, and to ask follow-up questions. Given the proven importance of their leadership, and in light of their extensive reliance on flowcharts, group leaders were provided with revised flowcharts that would allow each group greater flexibility. By keeping the instructions to a minimum and eschewing detailed explanations, the authors sought to ensure a smooth facilitation process.

Students were not required to take notes—even if someone shared a unique or interesting observation—because there was concern that it could take up too much time, and jeopardize the flow of the discussion. The instructor was accessible the entire time, going from group to group in case the students had any inquiries and/or needed any help. Previous research (Kudo and Sugimura 2019a) indicates that students are engaged enough in this process to be able to carry on a discussion for the allocated time period.

There was a total of 13 groups—six in one class and seven in the other—amounting to about 390 minutes of conversation that had to be transcribed. Following the same procedure as before, the authors narrowed down which two groups from both classes

would be analyzed. The groups were selected based on their completion of the pre-lesson assignments.

All four group sessions were first transcribed. However, because of the noise levels in the classroom, the authors had to listen to the audio carefully at least ten times before the transcription process could be completed. At this point, the length of each utterance was measured and assigned a serial number.

Next, the authors examined the scripts and allotted each utterance one of Hanauer's (2001) nine codes, or Kudo and Sugimura's (2019b) five codes. Some of the utterances received a pending code as the authors found it difficult to give them a specific code at the time. Once they were finished with their careful evaluation of all the utterances, the authors revisited the ones that were still pending; together, they discussed how to categorize them. Finally, each author conducted an independent re-examination of the transcripts, coded all the utterances, and then the authors had several meetings to discuss discrepancies they had encountered. *MaxQDA Analytics Pro 12*, the software program utilized for the entire coding process, helped the authors keep track of all the coded utterances during their many meetings.

IV. Results

All the utterances were analyzed and given codes. Their length and the number of times they appeared as well as their percentages are shown in Table 3. All four groups spent approximately 30 minutes each on the group discussion. The length of each utterance varied greatly—an utterance can either be a single word, like “really,” or it could be 150 seconds long. Each utterance was related to the tasks that had been assigned to the students—indicative of the fact that the students had been 100 percent engaged in their group discussions in the time allocated. All the utterances quoted in this article were translated by the authors, as all the discussions were conducted in Japanese. The results for each code are described below.

First, as indicated in Table 3, the most frequently cited utterance, across all four groups, was a code 13 (sharing prepared answers), which constituted about 36.1 percent of discussion time. At 12.9 percent, the second most frequent utterance was a code 11 (facilitating discussion). Third on the list of the most frequently observed statements, were code 3 (interpretive hypothesis) at 9.6 percent, followed by code 2 (questioning) and code 9 (general statement) utterances at 9.3 and 7.9 percent, respectively.

An analysis of all the categorized utterances, across all four groups of students, revealed that statements coded as 1 (noticing) lasted from 58 to 94 seconds. Code 2

utterances (questioning) were the second and third most frequently observed in two of the groups (Groups 1 and 2), at 258 seconds and 126 seconds, respectively. Code 3 utterances (interpretive hypothesis)—which were observed in all the groups and lasted anywhere between 86 and 197 seconds—were the second and third most frequently made remarks in Groups 4 and 3. We assume that the reason why most students' interpretive hypotheses were assigned code 13 (sharing prepared answers) is because they wrote their interpretation of the texts on their worksheets in advance. Code 3 utterances, on the other hand, refer to interpretive hypotheses that were generated during their group discussions. Code 4 (re-statement of an interpretive hypothesis) remarks were prevalent in all groups, ranging from 21 seconds to 128 seconds in length. There were no code 5 (counter statement of an interpretive hypothesis) statements in one of the groups (Group 4); in Groups 1, 2, and 3, the code 5 remarks were less than 71 seconds long.

Code 6 (elaborative statement of an interpretive hypothesis), 7 (world knowledge), and 8 (integrating knowledge), are utterances that require higher-order thinking skills. Code 6 remarks briefly summarize what has been mentioned thus far but also include information that could generate different perspectives; for example, after the students talked about why the wife had wanted a cat, and how the husband responded to her, “considering the relationship between the couple, the wife did not necessarily want a cat but used the cat as a tool to get his attention or make up for her loneliness.” The shortest code 6 statement was six seconds (Group 4) while the longest was 82 seconds (Group 1). Those of Groups 2 and 3 were 21 and 29 seconds, respectively.

Students in all four groups made code 7 statements, ranging from 25 to 44 seconds in length. Code 8 remarks were a combination of the students' interpretation of the text and any extra-textual knowledge they might possess; for example, “the wife wants a cat, and she repeats her desire many times, but does not sound like she really wants a cat. It is like we want to go to Hawaii for the next vacation. We wish we could, but we know that it is not really happening.” Whereas Groups 1 and 2 spent 72 and 83 seconds, respectively on code 8 utterances, Groups 3 and 4 made no such comments. Plenty of code 9 utterances (general statements), which are not considered to affect the students' interpretations of the text, were often noted.

Codes 10 through 14 were created by the authors in a previous study. Code 10 (confirming information) was not observed in either Groups 2 or 3, and found to be less than 26 seconds in Groups 1 and 4. Code 11 (facilitating discussion) was the second most frequent utterance type in Groups 2 and 3, at 167 and 251 seconds, respectively

Table 3. Number and length of utterances made during the group discussions

| Group | Code | | | | | | | | | | | | | | total |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | |
| 1 | 19 | 73 | 47 | 22 | 12 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 54 | 15 | 55 | 30 | 32 | 8 | 387 |
| | (0.049) | (0.189) | (0.121) | (0.057) | (0.031) | (0.023) | (0.018) | (0.010) | (0.140) | (0.039) | (0.142) | (0.078) | (0.083) | (0.021) | (1.00) |
| | 78 | 258 | 132 | 128 | 42 | 82 | 29 | 72 | 126 | 26 | 209 | 77 | 416 | 52 | 1727 |
| | (0.045) | (0.150) | (0.076) | (0.074) | (0.024) | (0.047) | (0.017) | (0.042) | (0.073) | (0.015) | (0.121) | (0.045) | (0.241) | (0.030) | (1.00) |
| 2 | 2 | 12 | 13 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 35 | 0 | 36 | 6 | 26 | 4 | 150 |
| | (0.013) | (0.080) | (0.087) | (0.047) | (0.013) | (0.013) | (0.013) | (0.020) | (0.233) | (0.000) | (0.240) | (0.040) | (0.174) | (0.027) | (1.00) |
| | 58 | 126 | 86 | 50 | 21 | 21 | 44 | 83 | 90 | 0 | 167 | 21 | 827 | 31 | 1625 |
| | (0.036) | (0.078) | (0.053) | (0.031) | (0.013) | (0.013) | (0.027) | (0.051) | (0.055) | (0.000) | (0.103) | (0.013) | (0.509) | (0.019) | (1.00) |
| 3 | 18 | 23 | 42 | 8 | 12 | 4 | 8 | 0 | 55 | 0 | 78 | 7 | 46 | 5 | 306 |
| | (0.059) | (0.075) | (0.137) | (0.026) | (0.039) | (0.013) | (0.026) | (0.000) | (0.180) | (0.000) | (0.256) | (0.023) | (0.150) | (0.016) | (1.00) |
| | 94 | 49 | 171 | 21 | 71 | 29 | 37 | 0 | 167 | 0 | 251 | 12 | 538 | 36 | 1476 |
| | (0.064) | (0.033) | (0.116) | (0.014) | (0.048) | (0.020) | (0.025) | (0.000) | (0.113) | (0.000) | (0.170) | (0.008) | (0.365) | (0.024) | (1.00) |
| 4 | 12 | 48 | 36 | 9 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 33 | 4 | 50 | 12 | 37 | 5 | 251 |
| | (0.048) | (0.191) | (0.143) | (0.036) | (0.000) | (0.004) | (0.016) | (0.000) | (0.132) | (0.016) | (0.199) | (0.048) | (0.147) | (0.020) | (1.00) |
| | 90 | 133 | 197 | 74 | 0 | 6 | 25 | 0 | 100 | 6 | 157 | 20 | 423 | 33 | 1264 |
| | (0.071) | (0.105) | (0.156) | (0.059) | (0.000) | (0.005) | (0.020) | (0.000) | (0.079) | (0.005) | (0.124) | (0.016) | (0.335) | (0.026) | (1.00) |
| Average | 13 | 39 | 35 | 12 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 44 | 5 | 55 | 14 | 35 | 6 | 276 |
| | (0.047) | (0.141) | (0.127) | (0.043) | (0.025) | (0.014) | (0.019) | (0.007) | (0.159) | (0.019) | (0.199) | (0.051) | (0.127) | (0.022) | (1.00) |
| | 80 | 142 | 147 | 68 | 34 | 35 | 34 | 39 | 121 | 8 | 196 | 33 | 551 | 38 | 1526 |
| | (0.053) | (0.093) | (0.096) | (0.045) | (0.022) | (0.023) | (0.022) | (0.026) | (0.079) | (0.005) | (0.129) | (0.021) | (0.361) | (0.025) | (1.00) |

Note. The number in the upper row indicates the number of utterances made during the group discussions. The number in the lower row indicates the length of each utterance in seconds. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of utterances, and utterance length in percentage terms. The average indicates the average of all the groups.

and the third most frequent in Groups 1 and 4, at 209 and 157 seconds, respectively. As a contrast to code 5 (counter statement of an interpretive hypothesis), code 12 (agreeing / empathizing) was added, and its presence was confirmed across all groups. Comparing the length of codes 5 and 12 utterances revealed that Groups 1 and 4 had engaged in more code 12 utterances than those of code 5, with the reverse being true for Group 3. Group 2, however, spent exactly the same amount of time on both codes 5 and 12 statements. Finally, code 13 (sharing prepared answers) was the most frequent utterance across groups, lasting 416 seconds (Group 1), 827 seconds (Group 2), 538 seconds (Group 3), and 423 seconds (Group 4). Code 14 utterances are unclear statements; as such, they were not analyzed.

V. Discussion

The objective of this study was twofold: 1) to learn if there were changes in the students' utterances after the authors reviewed and revised the lesson, and if so, 2) whether these change(s) indicated that students' logical and critical thinking skills might have been stimulated by the group discussions and/or could lead to more active discussions.

To explore these questions, the results of this study were compared to those of earlier study. Relevant utterances coded as 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 13, will be examined to see if there were any apparent changes between the two lessons; the reasons behind why these particular statements were chosen, will be explained later in this section. In both the earlier and the current studies, the time spent on group discussions ranged from 27 to 30 minutes; thus, the comparison will be presented as percentages of the whole discussion time allocated other than the lengths of the utterances (see Figures 1 and 2).

The overall goal of lessons using literary work is to stimulate students' logical and critical thinking skills by combining independent analysis and group/class discussions based on their work. Therefore, it can be said that the more utterances requiring thinking skills were observed, the more successful a lesson could be said to be. In that respect, as previously mentioned, codes 6 through 8 are important, and code 5 (counter statement of an interpretive hypothesis) is relevant because disagreeing with someone's interpretive hypothesis requires the ability to reason.

Figure 1 indicates the utterance length percentages, codes 5 through 8, in both the previous pilot lesson's group discussions—conducted in the spring of 2017— and those that were conducted during the current study. With respect to the current

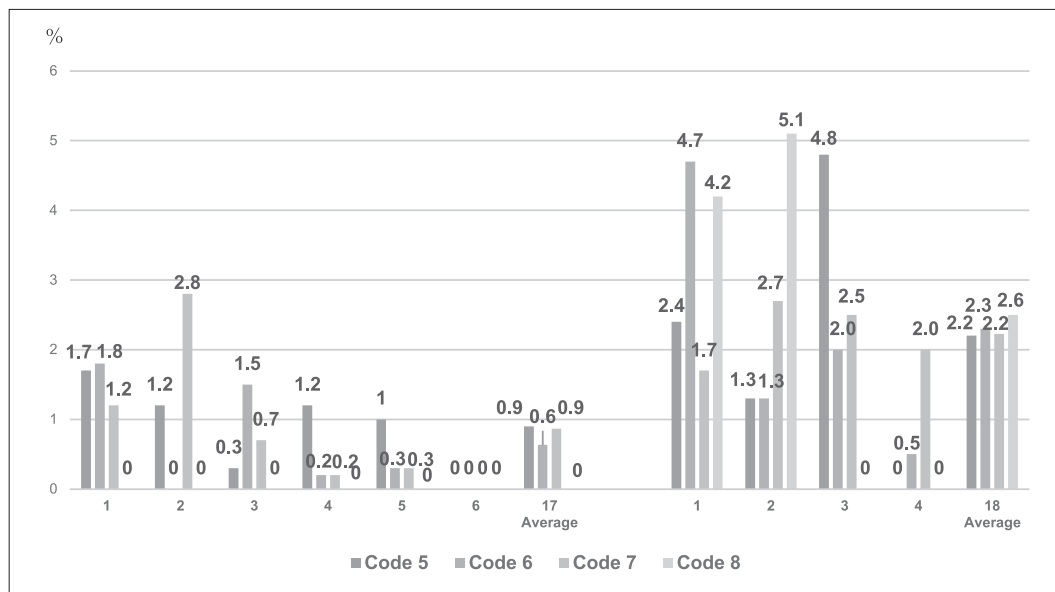


Figure 1. Percentage of codes 5 through 8 utterance lengths during the group discussions in the previous and current studies. The seven graphs on the left indicate the results of Groups 1-6 and the average of the six group discussions conducted in the previous study. The five graphs on the right indicate the results of Groups 1-4 and the average of the four group discussions conducted in the current study.

study, Figure 1 shows that Groups 3 and 4 did not have any code 8 utterances while Group 4 had no code 5 remarks. However, utterances categorized as 5 through 8 were much more prevalent in this study than in the previous one, and the average of those utterances rose from 0.9, 0.6, 0.9, and 0 percent, to 2.2, 2.3, 2.2, and 2.6 percent, respectively. The increase is not drastic, but suggests that the students were more involved with the group discussions logically and critically.

Further, it should be noted that these utterances were often made when students were discussing a new set of questions, which were modified for the current pilot lesson, like “Why do you think the wife wants a cat? Based on the text, give the specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.” The authors added inferential questions, which tend to invite a more careful reading, to the revised worksheet. According to Tanaka, Shimada, and Kondo (2011), this leads to a range of outcomes, one of which is that it encourages students to read the text multiple times and from different perspectives.

Figure 2 summarizes the results of codes 10, 11, and 13 remarks, which the authors intended to keep to a minimum as they were not directly related to “careful

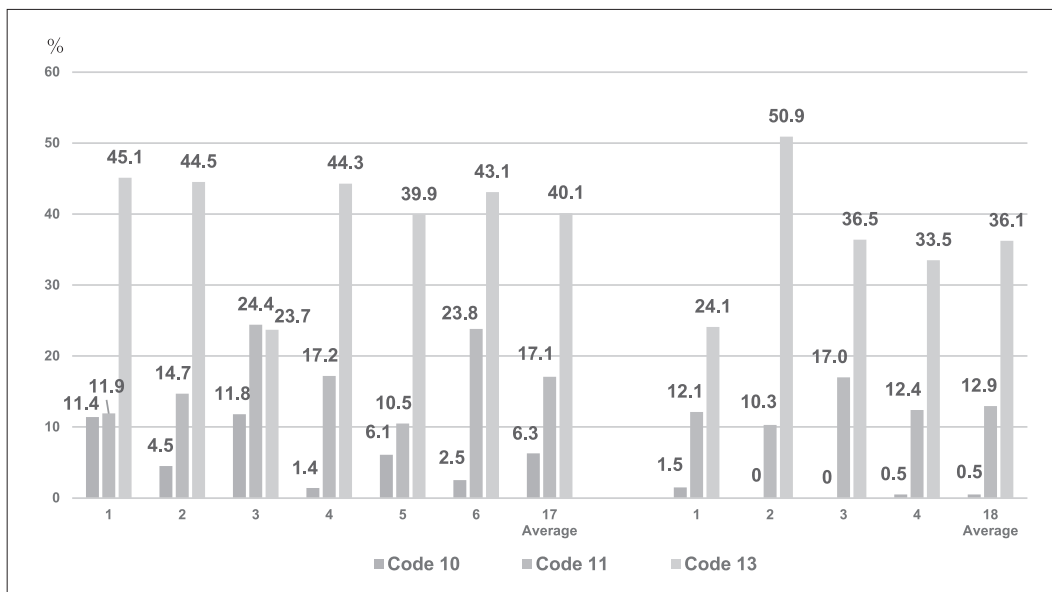


Figure 2. Percentage of codes 10, 11, and 13 utterance lengths during the group discussions in the previous and current studies. The seven graphs on the left indicate the results of Groups 1-6 and the average of the six group discussions conducted in the previous study. The five graphs on the right indicate the results of Groups 1-4 and the average of the four group discussions conducted in the current study.

or substantial thinking” based on previous research. This would allow the students to spend more time discussing something richer and more meaningful in a limited time span.

One of the major findings from the previous study was that each group leader played a crucial role in the discussions. Because of the nature of the role, codes 10 (confirming information) and 11 (facilitating discussion) utterances were often made by the group leaders.

For the purposes of this study, note-taking during the group discussion was optional and not required, allowing students to focus on just the discussion, which explains the small, dwindling number of code 10 utterances as you can see from Figure 2.

In the previous study, there were two different kinds of code 11 utterances: 1) simply facilitating the discussion, as well as encouraging others to speak, and 2) ensuring that group members were on the “right track.” Although there was no “right” way to proceed with the group discussion, with a flowchart that had far too many instructions to refer to, the group leader tended to spend more time checking the flowchart to see if they were doing a good job. To remedy this, the authors

modified the group work flowchart, which had a list of discussion questions and tasks for them to complete, making it simpler and more flexible. As a result, almost all the code 11 utterances were made to encourage someone to speak up and/or issue follow-up statements. The number of code 11 remarks may not have undergone a significant change; however, they were mostly confined to the facilitation process and were aimed at making the group discussions more dynamic and effortless.

As the previous study showed, it became evident that students spent more time sharing their prepared answers (code 13 utterances) than the authors had anticipated. Considering their English proficiency levels, the students had to read the text before the pilot lesson in order to be able to discuss their interpretation of it. However, this should not have taken up too much of their discussion time, especially if they were just reading the responses they had already written in their worksheets. Thus, although it was the author's intention to reduce their interaction to just sharing their prepared answers, the code 13 utterances prompted even more open discussion among the students, allowing them to exchange ideas, reflect on each other's insights, and further evaluate the text. As Figure 2 shows, there was a significant reduction in code 13 remarks in all groups but one: Group 2. Almost all the code 13 utterances in Group 2, which constituted 50.9 percent of the total discussion time, came from one specific student. She was extremely enthusiastic about English literature and very passionate about her own interpretations of the text, which were unique as well as interesting. She spoke extensively and was also a group leader. However, it was overall successful to reduce the length of the code 13 remarks.

VI. Conclusion

This study was conducted to see if 1) there were any changes in the students' utterances during the group discussion that followed a review of the three-phrase lesson that preceded it; and if so 2) what these changes consisted of, specifically if they comprised remarks that demonstrated a marked improvement in students' logical and critical thinking skills.

Regarding the first objective, a comparison of earlier study results with those of the current study, revealed observable changes in the quality of the students' remarks. As for the second objective, there was an increase in the number of utterances related to logical and critical thinking skills and the lengths of the more insubstantial utterances, such as confirming of the discussion procedure, were reduced. There were seven questions to discuss, and as mentioned earlier, inferential questions tend to

lead to discussions that are markedly livelier, and more controversial. The addition of this directive—"Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer"—to each question, seems to have helped students present their answers in a much more logical manner. In the previous study, most of the code 13 utterances (i.e., sharing prepared answers) were the same as those written in their worksheets. During this study, the authors noticed that students added evidence from the primary text to what they had written, after they had participated in the group discussion. These results suggest that the students were more engaged in discussions requiring higher-order thinking skills than they had been previously.

It became apparent that, although students may not have openly disputed their peers' claims during the group discussions, this did not prevent them from challenging the very same claims in the form of counter statements, while writing their reflective comments. This indicated that not just the discussion, but the whole lesson, consisted of three phases—each one inspiring the students to examine the text more carefully, and requiring them to utilize their thinking skills. Japanese students tend to avoid confrontations and arguments, especially when there is no single answer. Moreover, these students are science majors, and most of them are not very confident in English. Given these factors, the more comfortable option for them might be to reflect at length on other people's insights and only then put forward a counter statement in written form.

Finally, there are three limitations that should be addressed. The first being that, as described in the previous study, code 13 utterances could easily be assigned code 1 (noticing) or code 3 (interpretive hypothesis) statements. Since it was difficult for the authors to determine if these utterances had been inspired by the group discussion and/or generated by the students themselves prior to the lesson, it is possible that remarks that should have been coded otherwise were instead categorized as code 13 utterances. Being aware of this issue, the authors employed the same methodology in this study so that they could compare the results with those of the previous study. Students' written assignments could prove useful in future studies of this kind, when it comes to determining if and how pre-lesson assignments promote their thinking skills. Second, contrary to the authors' expectations, there was no significant increase in code 8 utterances (integrating knowledge). In fact, in two out of the four groups, these remarks were absent. This is possibly because the students did not feel a close connection with the text because it is difficult for university students to interpret the text as a wife or a husband would. Additionally, the couple is American, and they are in

Italy in this story. It might have been difficult for university students in Japan to relate to the story. Consequently, selecting a suitable piece of literature with the appropriate level of difficulty is very important. Finally, examining students' thinking processes and assessing their thinking skills has proved very difficult. There is no specific test for evaluating thinking skills per se, nor can they be greatly improved in a short amount of time. It is difficult for teachers and students to determine whether a literary text-based lesson has helped students develop their critical faculties. It became apparent, nonetheless, that the students were absorbed in substantial thinking throughout the three-phase lesson. Given the results, the authors concluded that a learning format utilizing literature could help foster logical and critical thinking skills. The hope is to find a reliable means of evaluation that will allow students to see just how much their thinking skills have developed.

Appendix (revised pre-lesson assignment)

1. Do you think the American couple are happy? Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.
2. How many cats do you think there are in the story? Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.

Note — For non-advanced classes, the following questions (instead of the one above) were posed:

2. Do you think the cat that the wife saw in the rain was the same as the one held by the maid? Do you think they are different? Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.
3. What kind of personalities do you think the hotel-keeper (padrone) has? Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.
4. Why do you think the wife wants a cat? Based on the text, give specific evidence and reasons to explain your answer.
5. a. When you hear someone repeatedly saying the same thing, what emotional state do you think the person is in? (e.g. "Good, good, good." "I did it, I did it, I did it." "I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.")
5. b. The wife repeats "like" and "want" in this text. Read those parts of the story again and describe your impressions.
6. Read the story from start to finish and write your own ninth paragraph, in Japanese. Drawing on the text, justify your reasons for writing the paragraph the way that you chose to do.

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Does Literature Stimulate Learners' Thinking Skills? A Comparison of Two Pilot Lessons

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Readers must interact with texts, particularly when reading and engaging with a literary work, because meaning is often implicit and its interpretation is left to each reader. To make sense of the world within a text, a reader must evaluate each text closely and carefully; this requires considerable thought. Given literature's capacity to provoke, the authors have incorporated literary texts into their coursework to enhance students' thinking skills—a move that was well received by students.

The authors had the students discuss a literary text in groups as part of a pilot lesson; they recorded and transcribed these discussions; finally, they analyzed them as a series of utterances. They sought to examine what the students had discussed and the way in which they had discussed it, to see if these lessons helped improve their thinking skills. In a previous study, utterances that required logical and critical thinking skills were not observed as frequently as anticipated, which suggested room for improvement.

The authors made some modifications and conducted another pilot lesson. The purpose of this study is to find out if there were any changes in the students' utterances; specifically, whether these utterances demonstrated students' capacity for logical and critical thinking and whether there was an observable increase in these skills after the second pilot lesson. This article a) compares the two pilot lessons; b) recommends tasks and assignments that might help students further cultivate their thinking skills; and c) outlines the current study's limitations.