

# Borrowing Books from Harvard: An Initial Evaluation of the Adaptation of a Harvard Business School Course for Undergraduate International Business Majors in a Japanese University

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## 1. Introduction

The university seminar has been described as the intersection of professional and career education in higher education (Shibahara, 2017), life shaping (Brender, 2005), and the true joy of studying at university (Nakano, 2019). At Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo, the Department of International Business in the Faculty of Economics (n.d.) aims to shape lives, identifying as one of its missions the nurturing of “a global workforce with the ability to act in the international arena.” This workforce, the Department goes on to state on its website, requires

global experience that allows [students] to accept different cultures and value systems...global communication skills that make it possible to effectively communicate and work closely with various types of people... [and] a capacity to learn that enables [students] to collect, analyze and make judgments even in unfamiliar circumstances.

Furthermore, inherent in the University’s educational philosophy of “Do for Others” and as part of the departmental diploma policies, the Department’s intention is to nurture students with the ability to construct harmonious human relationships and to reflect critically on one’s own behavior (Faculty of Economics, n.d.).

With this in mind, as an applied linguist by training and avid reader by vocation, I began to design a graduation seminar for international business majors that would meet the above stipulations. The fact that the seminar would be conducted in English and use only English language materials would likely result in improved English language skills. I felt strongly, though, that the seminar should not only be viewed as a course to improve one's English, but that it should also fit the University's and Department's educational philosophies. Finally, it should be of general interest and related in some way to the students' major and careers. The result was the development of a seminar that examines the concept of Leadership through the reading of Literature. The topic of Leadership is something that the students will face in their careers. Not only did I want the students to think about what type of leader they might become, but also what type of person they should look for as a mentor as they embark on their careers. Many students might even currently be in positions of leadership (club or sport activities, part time jobs, student-led organizations) or have been in the past.

The idea of learning about the concept of Leadership through Literature is not original; it is based on classes offered at Harvard Business School, an environment considerably different from that of Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo. Therefore, the idea needed to be adapted in a way that would create a learning environment and learning outcomes that would be meaningful for the students' careers, shape their lives in some way, and, hopefully, be the true joy of their time at university.

In this paper, I will first explain the rationale for examining the concept of Leadership and for using Literature to do so, and make note of considerations necessary when using Literature in an EFL classroom. After providing an outline of the course, I will analyze the progress of the course through the first semester using instructor observation and student feedback, and suggest changes to be made to improve the course.

## 2. Literature as a learning tool

Literature can be a useful tool when trying to explain economic or business concepts. (See Watts, 2002, for a detailed overview.) Literature often reflects societal perceptions of people who work in economics and business. It can enlighten student understanding of human behavior and motivation and can even have an influence on reader behavior (Watts, 2002). Literature provides access to circumstances that we, and especially 3<sup>rd</sup> year university students, might not have yet encountered (Oatley, 2016). In this way, by reading Literature, students can expand their sphere of experience. Circumstances are created in which students can relate new experiences gained in reading to their own experiences. This is especially true when reading Literature from other cultures.

Another benefit of using Literature in the classroom is that doing so provides situations in which we can reflect on and learn from the characters' experiences (Martin, 2011). Research shows

that literary fiction has the capacity to improve empathy in readers (Oatley, 2016). When we become fully engaged in a story, we begin to make inferences about characters. We might even become emotionally attached to a character. We learn about their vulnerabilities and imperfections because we are privy to their inner thoughts (Martin, 2011). A developed sense of empathy and a deeper understanding of a variety of cultural values will help students when they engage in international environments (Armstrong, 2015).

### **3. Literature in an EFL classroom**

Yet, using Literature in a foreign language for content purposes, as opposed to a language-learning tool, adds challenges for both the instructor and the student. One challenge centers on the reading skills and experience the students bring to the class. Upper division university students in Japan have already had at least seven full years of English instruction, three years each in junior and senior high school and one year in university. The reading instruction in these years tends to move from sentence level to short (2–3 paragraphs) essay level, the latter of which is often highly structured and inauthentic non-fiction texts. Students are taught to utilize pre-reading strategies, including skimming and scanning, and previewing to help them better understand and make use of a text, primarily for assessment purposes. While these strategies might be useful when reading a non-fiction text, they are rarely of use while reading fiction (Renandya, 2015).

While pre-reading strategies are of little use when reading fiction, some reading skills during the reading process are very useful. These include making predictions and inferences. If students already have these skills in their native language, then it should not be difficult to transfer them to a foreign language. It has been suggested, though, that language learners need to be at a certain proficiency before this transfer can occur (Renandya, 2015). Beforehand, students struggle too much with simply understanding language. As a result, reading a text that is far beyond linguistic competency (lexically and syntactically) is rarely beneficial; it can lead to cognitive overload, which in turn can lead to bewilderment and the inability to apply reading skills used in the native language, and ultimately inefficient use of time (Renandya, 2015; McKay, 1982). In order for students to be able to use the content of a book to engage in discussion, they must first be able to understand it. Therefore, text selection is critical.

When selecting texts for a literature-based course, the instructor must take into consideration the level of the text in terms of vocabulary and syntactic complexity, the accessibility of the text in terms of culture and history, and the length of the text. As indicated earlier, if the vocabulary or syntax of a text is too far beyond the ability of the reader, many of the benefits of reading literature are lost. When readers are too focused on what individual sentences or even phrases mean, they are cognitively less able to focus on the broader meaning of language and developments in a storyline.

Similarly, if the cultural or historical context of a text is too remote from the reader's own experience, extensive support, be it from the instructor or by the students themselves, is often necessary to understand a work of fiction. Preparing for or engaging in such support is time consuming and might reduce the time available for more rewarding discussion or even interrupt the flow of reading. Time is also important when considering the length of text to be read. The length of a course and individual sessions, as well as the expected homework burden, must be factored in when selecting texts.

Despite these challenges, using Literature in an EFL context has many benefits, including development of intercultural understanding, exposure to a wider variety of language than is typical of EFL classes, and opportunity for personal growth through the assessment, evaluation, and discussion of issues raised in texts (Bibby & McIlroy, 2013). It is this last benefit, personal growth, that is the main focus of the seminar introduced next.

#### 4. The seminar

The impetus for the seminar is a book written by Joseph L. Badaracco, the John Shad Professor of Business Ethics at Harvard Business School. In *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership through Literature*, Badaracco (2006) explains how he uses Literature instead of cases studies in his Harvard MBA course on Leadership. He assigns works of fiction and engages students in thought-provoking discussions about “the recurring tests of character faced by men and women in positions of responsibility” (Badaracco, 2006, p. 5). The book introduces a collection of stories and the questions of character that emerge from those stories. Readers are challenged to “examine and test their own characters” as they examine and discuss the protagonists' characters (Badaracco, 2006, p. 5).

Based on the 2020 HBS course catalogue, the eight works introduced in *Questions of Character* are likely covered over a 13-week seminar meeting two hours each week (Harvard Business School, n.d.).<sup>i</sup> This calculates to an estimated 1,100 pages in total, for an average of 85 pages per week, a pace much too quick for undergraduates who are neither native speakers of English nor English majors. Studies of timed reading show that Japanese college students read English at rates varying from 68 to 141 words per minute (Swanson & Collett, 2016). A page of text usually consists of 250

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<sup>i</sup> Although suggested by way of the development of *Questions of Character: Illuminating the Heart of Leadership through Literature*, it is unclear if all eight texts were assigned each term. The current course Badaracco teaches is entitled “The Moral Leader”, and is likely based on a different book, *The Moral Leader: Challenges, Tools and Insights* (Sucher, S., 2007, Routledge), which covers a larger number of texts, but that are separated into various themes on morality. From the course descriptions on the Harvard Business School website, it appears that one of these themes is covered in each quarter as the descriptions are different for each quarter.

words, but fiction might have fewer due to an abundance of dialogue. A conservative estimate would be that students require five minutes to read one page. I decided to start students off with approximately 20–25 pages of reading per week and gradually increase the reading load as students developed a reading habit. Hence, the syllabus spread the readings out over two 14-week semesters, including an assigned reading for summer vacation between semesters. Some short non-fiction readings of 2–3 pages in length were also assigned. These pieces were necessary to teach the writing skills integral to completing the graduation thesis, including summaries, response essays, and syntheses.

#### **4.1 The students**

Students who wish to take a graduation seminar must apply directly to the seminar instructor for permission to enroll. The application process for this seminar required students to complete a questionnaire including a short essay on why they wanted to take the course, a short non-fiction reading assignment, and an interview. The questionnaire asked for information such as where and for how long they studied abroad, and whether or not they liked to read. They were also asked to rank (1 = “very poor” to 4 = “very good”) their perceived ability in the four language skills and to write a little about a book they had read in English. In addition to getting an idea of the students’ English levels as indicated by objective measures (standardized test scores), I wanted to get a sense of the students’ confidence in their English ability. I could compare the objective and subjective assessments with my own assessment from reading the short essay and from the interview.

The interview consisted of asking the students to tell me a little about themselves and why they wanted to take the seminar. I asked follow-up questions and gradually moved to questions about the short reading assignment. These questions were not only about general comprehension, but also required students to make inferences and state their opinions. I also asked students to make connections between the reading and their own experience. The interviews allowed me to not only compare the four language skill areas, but also to determine how willing the students were to speak about things for which there was no correct answer.

Academic Affairs at the University also provided each student’s transcript. If a student had a low grade in an English class, I asked about it. Interestingly, the students who had low grades considering their high level of English, indicated that the classes had not been interesting, they did not get along with their instructor, and that they were not motivated in their English classes. Such information suggests that these students might achieve better results if the content is interesting and challenging.

All but one applicant was accepted to the seminar. The student who did not pass the interview failed to even try to explain the meaning of the title of the assigned reading, despite being

prompted in three different ways. The final make up of the class was four women and eight men.

#### 4.2 Progress of the class

The original plan for the class was to introduce each text in a short lecture that would introduce the author, the work itself, any cultural or historical background deemed necessary for understanding the text, and the overarching question and sub-questions of leadership introduced in Badaracco (2006). Such a limited introduction creates a framework or schema in which to fit the text, but without the depth or scope that might inhibit the authenticity of the reading experience or reduce the extent to which students are required to read actively (Parkinson & Thomas, 2000; Lazar, 1993). Students were expected to complete the reading assignments and come to class prepared to discuss the texts.

Two problems soon emerged. Students indicated that there was a lot of vocabulary they did not know. I encouraged them to resist looking up every word they did not know, as this would slow their reading speed. I showed them how to use context and morphology to gain a fair understanding of the general meaning of a word. It also became clear that students had some misunderstandings about what was happening in the stories, the basic plot and the relationships among the characters. In discussion, however, students would not question or correct each other's understanding of the stories. One remedy for this would have been for me to correct every error. However, this would take up valuable class time which was needed for discussion of character motivation and the discussion of the Badaracco questions. Instead, for subsequent reading assignments, I provided a list of simple comprehension questions to help students as they read. The purpose was to provide students with a self-study tool; if they could answer the questions, then they had a good, basic understanding of the story. There was no intention on my part to go over the questions in class; the students were encouraged to consult with their classmates first. If students still had questions, though, I would try to elicit answers from classmates before answering them myself.

As the weeks passed, the second problem became clear. Some students were not keeping up with the increased pace of the reading requirement. Some students readily admitted they had not read the text for the week; as for others, it was likely they had not completed the readings because they could not respond to any questions posed. Having not read the texts was not the only reason for problems in discussion. I had expected that students who had completed the readings would participate actively in discussion and not require direction from the instructor. However, when I posed a question, students were reluctant to discuss it with each other. Rather, I would have to call on someone to answer and then ask if anyone agreed, disagreed, had something different to say. In general, the students seemed reluctant, for whatever reason, to *offer* opinions or participate autonomously. I wondered if the questions that seemed straightforward to me had not even crossed the students'

minds. So, I decided to provide discussion questions in advance as well so that students could prepare answers. It was hoped that this would allow us to make better use of class time. The plan was not to go over each question in order or even to cover all the discussion questions. Rather, it was hoped that discussion would progress organically, covering whatever topics came up in what was supposed to be a fluid manner. In the prepared answers, students would have some material to reference for discussion. Some students came to class with written answers to the discussion questions and participated more than in previous classes. Others participated more in discussion even though they had not written out answers.

The importance of discussion in this type of course cannot be overstated, as without discussion students are not exposed to other perspectives, cannot confirm their own opinions, and risk a decline in oral and aural language skills because of low production (Lazar, 1993). Generally speaking, as the semester progressed, so did the quality of discussion. However, many students still seemed reluctant to participate in discussion. I suspected an issue identified earlier in the semester were still present: students were not completing the reading assignments on time. To confirm my suspicion that students were not finishing the readings and to try to understand why they were not, I conducted a survey at the end of the semester.

## **5. The questionnaire**

In addition to questions about completion of reading assignments, the questionnaire included items to ascertain whether changes I had made throughout the semester were helpful to the students. The anonymous questionnaire was conducted through the university's learning management system. Students had one week after the end of classes to complete the questionnaire. Nine of the twelve students (three women, six men) completed the questionnaire. (See the Appendix for the full questionnaire.)

### **5.1 Results**

The first question tried to assess how difficult the students found the course. No students indicated the course was "significantly more difficult", "less difficult", or "significantly less difficult" than expected. For the item "Compared to your expectations before the seminar started, the level of difficulty is \_\_\_\_\_", four students indicated "as difficult as expected", while five students indicated "more difficult than expected". We can surmise, then, that the course was not beyond the reach of at least the students who completed the questionnaire.

The next four questions asked about the amount of reading required. Students were asked to rate the amount of reading required each week. No students indicated there was "too much reading

each week”, however four indicated there was “a lot of reading each week”. Three students indicated there was “an appropriate amount of reading each week”, and two indicated there was “not much reading each week”. No students indicated there was “too little reading each week”. This data as well suggests that for about half the students, the reading load was not an issue, though it might have been a challenge for the other half.

In response to “Are you able to finish the reading assignments on time?” four students indicated “Yes,” three students indicated “Usually”, and two students indicated “Sometimes”. No students selected “Rarely” or “No”. Students had been advised at the beginning of the semester to schedule regular reading times in order to keep up with the reading assignments. In order to determine whether students had employed this strategy, students were asked what strategies they had used to keep up with the reading assignments. Multiple answers were possible. Only two students indicated they had scheduled time to read. Five students indicated that they carried the book with them at all times so that they could read whenever they had some time. One student indicated no strategies were used, and three students indicated “Other”, adding

- I bring a lot of stuff so that I have a book on my phone as kindle. And it is possible to skip particular pages.
- I usually read it at once, because I tend to forget the contents or story when I divide the book into several period.
- I am always revising any new words and expressions in the book that I have bumped into while reading them.

Of the two students who indicated they scheduled time to read, only one also indicated that she was able to complete the readings on time. The other indicated that she was only sometimes able to complete the readings on time. In contrast, three of the four students who were able to complete the readings on time did not schedule time to read. Two of these students carried the reading with them at all times so that they could read whenever they had time; one indicated that she usually completes the readings in one sitting (“I usually read it at once”). These data suggest that the strategy recommended by the instructor might not be effective and that students have other strategies that work for them, though no definitive conclusion can be made due the low number of respondents.

Students were also asked what prevents them from completing the readings on time. Eight answers and space for free writing (“Other”) were provided. Students could select all applicable answers. Table 1 shows the number of responses to this question.

Two points of interest emerged from the answers to this question. One point is the time re-



**Table 1. Responses to the Question “What Prevents You from Keeping Up with the Reading?”**

Answer	Responses
I don't have enough time.	1
I'm too busy with my job or other interests.	2
I'm too busy with other school work.	2
I wait too long to start reading.	2
The books are not interesting.	0
The books are too difficult.	1
I don't like to read.	0
I look up words I don't know, and this slows me down.	4
Other (specify) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My interests usually goes here and there... basically towards anything. This distracts me from focusing on reading articles and other longer stories.</li> <li>• Because of my inability of English itself, sometimes it is difficult for me to read through books at early pace.</li> </ul>	2

quired to complete the readings. Only a third of the students indicated they are too busy for one reason or another to complete the readings on time. (One student selected “I don't have enough time”, “I'm too busy with my job or other interests”, and “I'm too busy with other school work”, all three.) This suggests that most students have enough time to complete the readings on time. Four students indicated that they looked up words they did not know, and this slowed them down. However, none of these four indicated being busy with other things as a reason for not completing the readings. This, in addition to the one “The books are too difficult” response and the one indication that perhaps his English ability is too low, suggests that vocabulary might be a contributive factor to students' inability to complete readings on time. This was supported by the responses to a specific question about vocabulary in the readings.

Although no students indicated the vocabulary in the readings was “too difficult”, five students indicated that the vocabulary in the readings was “very difficult”. Three rated the vocabulary at about their level, and one indicated that the vocabulary was “not so difficult”. While these data might suggest that difficult vocabulary was preventing some students from completing readings on time, responses to another question clearly indicated that this was not the case.

This question asked students to indicate all statements that best reflected their thinking about vocabulary and the reading assignments. *No* students indicated that they had “trouble finishing the reading assignments in time because of the level of vocabulary”. A third of students indicated that they look up most words they do not know, but two-thirds of students indicated they “try to guess the meaning of words by using clues in the text (context)”. One student selected both. Of the three students who indicated they look up most words they do not know, two indicated this as a reason

they were unable to complete the readings in time. One of these two students, though, also indicated that the vocabulary was at about his level. There appears to be some sort of relationship between vocabulary level and ability to complete the readings on time, but that exact relationship is unclear.

When asked if they had trouble understanding the stories because the vocabulary was too difficult, no one responded that “understanding of the basic outline of the stories” was adversely affected because of difficult vocabulary, while four indicated that they had “trouble understanding the details of the stories” because the vocabulary was too difficult. This inability to clearly understand details might contribute to students’ unwillingness to contribute more actively to discussion. Attention to details, including nuanced adjectives, adverbs, and verbs, are important when examining what a character’s thoughts or motivations are.

Questions were also asked to determine students’ awareness of their own behavior in class. Three students indicated that they “ask questions in class”. Six indicated they “offer [their opinion] in class”, while four indicated they “clarify others’ opinions in class”. The fact that so few students ask questions in class suggests that they either do not have questions, there is not enough time to ask questions, or students are reluctant to ask questions. Only four students indicated there was “adequate time to ask questions in class”. Four students indicated some reluctance to speak in class. Three students indicated they hesitate to speak in class because they are “afraid of making a mistake”. It is unclear if the mistakes are mistakes in language or mistakes in comprehension of the texts. One student indicated hesitation to speak in class because of being “afraid of what classmates will think”. While reluctance to speak in class was indicated by fewer than half of the respondents, because one quarter (three students) of the class members did not participate in the survey, it is possible that more than half of the students feel uncomfortable speaking up in class. This is a problem. As discussion is the central part of in-class work, participation in discussion by as many students as possible would expand the breadth of discussion. Participation in discussion would also help maintain or improve students’ English speaking skills.

Two students indicated they were able to maintain their English language skills, while three indicated their English language skills had improved. Two students indicated both, and two students did not indicate either. These are *perceived* improvement and/or maintenance; there has not been any standardized testing to measure language ability. However, self-perceived improvement is important to maintain intrinsic motivation. Many of the students indicated that one of the reasons they wanted to take the seminar was to maintain or improve their English skills.

Despite the many problems that emerged, many students indicated that the introductions to the books and the comprehension and discussion questions were helpful. Most students also indicated they had “a better understanding of the books after class discussion.” All students indicated their motivation had increased since the start of the semester, and all but one indicated they were looking

forward to the following semester.

Results of the questionnaire reveal many aspects of the seminar where improvement is necessary. I could introduce some vocabulary exercises as pre-reading tasks. This will likely improve student reading speed and understanding of details in the stories. I might also spend some time on discussion language, using simpler texts at the beginning of the course for practice purposes. This might help students become more comfortable with not only the language but also offering their own opinions and clarifying others' opinions.

## **6. Reflection**

My observations and feedback from the students showed that the volume of reading, even at a reduced pace was perhaps too ambitious for these students. As the semester progressed, some students appeared to become used to the volume of reading and what was expected of them in class discussion, but a more gradual increase in reading volume and more deliberate instruction in discussion skills would likely help all students participate more effectively and more confidently. Both of these are essential if students are to be expected to lead discussion themselves, as is the plan for the second semester. If remedies are made to improve on the course, students should have fewer problems using the same books and plays used in the Harvard Business School course, though perhaps at a reduced number. An important question emerges, then, of whether it is necessary to use the same texts. This seminar at Meiji Gakuin University might be improved even more if texts that are more accessible for students are selected. This would include not only texts that are linguistically more accessible but also culturally and historically more accessible. Stories in a Japanese or more contemporary context would help eliminate some obstacles and perhaps be more meaningful for the students.

This paper has examined only the first semester of the course. Further assessment and analysis of the course is necessary, not the least of which is analysis of the voluntary interviews that were part of the survey. Also, whether an additional semester and adjustments to the administration of the course relieve any of the issues that arose from my observations and the questionnaire would be meaningful. Long term, more accessible texts and the potential for English translations of Japanese texts need to be considered for use in the seminar. Furthermore, it will be essential to determine if, after completing the seminar, students have acquired some understanding the concept of Leadership and of what characteristics we might look for in leaders. Also, if and how students integrate what they have learned into their graduation theses will shed more light on the value of the seminar.

Appendix

Survey

- Q1. Indicate your sex.  
 Female  
 Male
- Q2. What is your most recent TOEFL or IELTS score?
- Q3. Compared to your expectations before the seminar started, the level of difficulty is \_\_\_\_\_.  
 significantly higher than expected  
 higher than expected  
 about as expected  
 lower than expected  
 significantly lower than expected
- Q4. Are you able to finish the reading assignments on time?  
 Yes  
 Usually  
 Sometimes  
 Rarely  
 No
- Q5. What strategies do you use to keep up with the reading? Select all that apply.  
 I schedule time to read.  
 I carry the book with me at all times so that I can read whenever I have some time.  
 I don't use any strategies.  
 Other (specify)
- Q6. What prevents you from keeping up with the reading? Select all that apply.  
 I don't have enough time.  
 I'm too busy with my job or other interests.  
 I'm too busy with other school work.  
 I wait too long to start reading.  
 The books are not interesting.  
 The books are too difficult.  
 I don't like to read.  
 I look up words I don't know, and this slows me down.  
 Other (specify)
- Q7. Rate the amount of reading required.  
 There's too much reading each week.  
 There's a lot of reading each week.  
 There's an appropriate amount of reading each week.  
 There's not much reading each week.  
 There's too little reading each week.
- Q8. Rate the vocabulary in the readings.  
 too difficult

- very difficult
- about my level
- not so difficult
- not difficult at all

- Q9. Select the statements that best reflect your thinking about vocabulary and the reading assignments. Select all that apply.
- I have trouble understanding the basic outline of the stories because the vocabulary is too difficult.
  - I have trouble understanding the details of the stories because the vocabulary is too difficult.
  - I have trouble finishing reading assignments in time because of the level of the vocabulary.
  - I have learned a lot of new words by reading the books.
  - I look up most words I do not know.
  - I try to guess the meaning of words by using clues in the text (context).
- Q10. Select the statements that best reflect your own behavior in class. Select all that apply.
- I ask questions in class.
  - I offer my opinion in class.
  - I clarify other's opinions in class.
  - I hesitate to speak in class because I'm afraid of making a mistake.
  - I hesitate to speak in class because I'm afraid of what my classmates will think.
- Q11. Select the statements that best reflect your thinking about the class in general. Select all that apply.
- I have been able to maintain my English level.
  - My English has improved.
  - The introductions to the books that are given by the instructor are helpful.
  - The guiding questions handouts are helpful.
  - I have a better understanding of the books after class discussion.
  - There is an adequate amount of time to discuss the books in class.
  - There is an adequate amount of time to ask questions in class.
- Q12. Has your motivation changed since the start of the seminar?
- Yes, it has increased.
  - Yes, it has decreased.
  - No, it has not changed.
- Q13. Are you looking forward to the seminar in the fall semester?
- Yes
  - No
  - Neither
- Q14. Are you willing to participate in a one-hour interview for the purposes of this research? If yes, please write your contact email in Other.
- No
  - Yes
  - Other

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