



A DISCUSSION, WRITING,
ACTIVITY & SERVICE GUIDE

for Teachers and Readers

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in collaboration with author Holly Thompson



Summary of *The Language Inside*



Emma Karas was raised in Japan; it's the country she calls home. But when her mother is diagnosed with breast cancer, Emma's family moves to a town outside Lowell, Massachusetts to stay with her grandmother while her mom undergoes treatment. Emma feels out of place in the United States, begins to have migraines, and longs to be back in Japan. At her grandmother's urging, she volunteers in a long-term care center to help Zena, a patient with locked-in syndrome, write down her poems. There, Emma meets Samnang, another volunteer, who assists elderly Cambodian refugees. Weekly visits to the care center, Zena's poems, dance, and noodle soup bring Emma and Samnang closer, until Emma must make a painful choice: stay in Massachusetts, or return early to Japan.

The Language Inside is a verse novel rich in language both spoken and unspoken and poetry that crosses boundaries to create a story layered with love, loss, movement and words.

Praise for *The Language Inside*



"Thompson captures perfectly the feeling of belonging elsewhere. A sensitive and compelling read that will inspire teens to contemplate how they can make a difference."
– *School Library Journal*, Starred

"Thompson nimbly braids political tragedy, natural disaster, PTSD, connections among families, and a cautious, quiet romance into an elegant whole. This is an artistic picture of devastation, fragility, bonds and choices."
– *Kirkus Reviews*

"With beautiful language and deep sensitivity, Holly Thompson explores the courage it takes to find your own voice."
– Patricia McCormick, author of National Book Award finalist *Never Fall Down*

"Thompson's eloquent novel speaks to us, carrying us along with Emma as she embarks on a life-altering journey from Japan to America. But it's Emma's inner journey that's the true adventure— pulsing with pain and passion, with humor, heart, and hope."
– Sonya Sones, author of *What My Mother Doesn't Know* and *To Be Perfectly Honest*

Sample Chapters:



You may access and download the first two chapters of *The Language Inside* at the Scribd website via [this link](#) or by scanning the QR code to the left.





Discussion Questions for *The Language Inside*

1. In Chapter 1, in the very first scene, Emma suffers a migraine. In her weakened condition, what do the reader and Samnang learn about her that they might not have learned from a healthier Emma?
2. How does the author use the structural freedom of poetry and typography in Chapter 1 (and later in Chapters 17, 37 and 45) to allow the reader to experience Emma's migraine?
3. Often, migraines are triggered by stress. Throughout the novel, try to identify things that are stressful for Emma.
4. In the midst of the earthquake in Japan, Emma is thankful for her boots. What does this detail tell us about Emma and how people may initially react to trauma?
5. In Chapter 5, we learn that Emma was involved in student council, Model UN and sports when she lived in Japan. How does this make her move to America harder? How does this make her move to America easier?
6. Emma has experienced a major earthquake and the aftermath of a tsunami. Emma's mother is dealing with breast cancer and Zena with a brainstem stroke and major disability. Samnang's mother, Leap Sok and Chea Pen have survived the Cambodian genocide. How might trauma from natural disasters, illness and war be similar? How might they be they different?
7. Emma is an American who hasn't lived in the US since she was a baby. What is home for Emma? Why? Can a person have two or more homes?
8. How does language connect Emma to or exclude Emma from a group? Consider also Zena and Samnang.
9. In Chapter 6, when Emma's family leaves Japan, Madoka and her mother give them some small gifts. How do these gifts represent Japanese or Kamakura culture? What gifts might represent you local or national culture or your country? What would *you* give to a friend who was moving overseas?
10. In Chapter 7, Emma says, "the coppersy coin of sun/slid into the haze" (p. 62). This metaphor (a comparison without the use of like or as) accentuates the shape and color of the setting sun. In Chapter 33, Zena's poem starts, "my stroke beached me like a whale on hot sand" (p. 336). This simile (a comparison that uses like or as) shows Zena's helplessness after her stroke. List and discuss other examples of similes and metaphors throughout the novel.
11. In Chapter 8, Emma is frustrated by the time difference when she wants to talk with Madoka in Japan. Find information online about time zones and the International Date Line to determine the time in Japan compared to where you live (or if you live in Japan, the time in Massachusetts compared to Japan). How could large differences in time zones disrupt a friendship or a romantic relationship?





Discussion Questions for *The Language Inside* (continued)

12. When a family member is dealing with an illness, the rest of the family has both fears and responsibilities. What are some of Emma's fears? What are some of her responsibilities? How do these fears and responsibilities affect Emma's character and the story? Show evidence from the text to support your response.
13. What are the most important qualities in a good friend? Which of these qualities does Madoka possess? Is there anyone in America who has these qualities for Emma?
14. Is Emma a willing volunteer at the Newell Center? What holds her back in this new setting? What does she gain from this service experience that she doesn't expect?
15. In Chapter 11, Emma is frustrated with herself for not knowing much Southeast Asian history. What do you know about Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, the three countries that Samnang mentions? What do you know about these countries in the 1970s and 1980s?
16. In Chapter 13, Emma is afraid that she's losing her grasp on the Japanese language. How is this significant for her? How does language relate to identity?
17. In Chapter 14, Emma meets Zena's sister, Anne, and becomes aware of all that Zena has lost. Consider the theme of loss throughout the novel. What have each of the characters lost?
18. Using examples from the text, explain the situations in which Emma is an insider, and the situations in which Emma is an outsider, and when she might be both.
19. In Chapter 15, Emma says, "...but I'm not a poet" (p. 151). Why do you think she says this? What does this line show you about her character?
20. In Chapter 15, after Emma learns about Samnang's mother's background, she comments that "she must be incredibly strong to have survived/and lucky" but Samnang says, "lucky, unlucky/who knows." How is Samnang's mother both lucky and unlucky? What about the other characters?
21. As shown in Zena's poem "My Sister" (p. 265) in Chapter 16, Zena's sister believed that Zena was trapped in her own body and helped others to understand this. Even if someone doesn't have a disability, it can be difficult to reveal one's inner selves. Do friends and family see the real you? How do you know? How is the real you different from the person that you let others see?
22. How does food play a role in this novel? What do we learn about Emma from her reactions to various foods?
23. Throughout this novel, the author has chosen to use minimal punctuation, few capital letters, and italics instead of quotation marks when formatting dialogue. The author also makes full use of page breaks/page turns. Is this approach effective for you? Why or why not? What does the reader, and the story gain from these formatting choices?
24. As we get older, our hopes, dreams, family relationships, friendships and bodies change. Often these changes bring stress. Emma's stress triggers migraines. Samnang's stress (and his father's history) makes him consider turning to alcohol. Emma hits Shin; Toby punches Emma. What are some





Discussion Questions for *The Language Inside* (continued)

healthy ways to handle stress? Do the characters in the book employ any of the strategies you thought of? Explain.

25. In Chapter 19, Zena is angry with Emma for being late. What larger issues might lie beneath her anger?
26. In Chapter 20, at the Cambodian dinner at Beth and Chris's house, Emma realizes that Sam Nang is actually Samnang. What are some reasons why Emma is upset about her error?
27. As shown in Chapters 21, 30, 37, 38 and 45 Emma and Samnang share a love of traditional and folk dances from Asia. To learn about Cambodian classical and folk dance, visit the [Angkor Dance Troupe Website](#). How does dance play a role in community or seasonal celebrations in the cultures around you?
28. In Chapter 24, Toby suggests making Japan sounds. Close your eyes and listen. What is unique about the soundscape in your town or city?
29. In Chapter 26, Zena has a new computer. How does technology—such as video chat or Zena's computer—assist with communication? What are some limitations of technology?
30. Although Emma's mother's struggle with breast cancer is part of the story, the novel is really about Emma. How does Emma's point of view steer the story in general? How does the background of the breast cancer subplot affect Emma's actions throughout the story?
31. In Chapter 29, why do you think the author chose to introduce the reader to Sarah, Zena's daughter, at the same time that Emma is delivering the Halloween costume? What is the emotional tone of the scene? How is the emotion heightened by the characters that are "on stage" for the scene?
32. Considering all that Zena has been through, which of her characteristics contribute to her strength in the face of adversity?
33. In Chapter 40, when Samnang wants to see his father, Emma is concerned. Later Emma tells Samnang to leave a party and come get her. How do the scenes in this chapter represent a turning point in their relationship?
34. After the poetry workshop in Chapter 41, Emma says everyone is, or can be, a poet. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
35. Why is it so difficult for Emma to choose between Japan and Massachusetts? Do you think she made the right decision?
36. What is the significance of the setting for the final scene? Why do you think Emma needed to be in place where she could see water? If you needed to talk to someone about something important, where would you want to be more than any other place?





Essay Questions

The following questions require analytical, critical, and creative thinking. Ask students to follow the writing process: prewriting, drafting, conferring, revising and editing to publish a piece of writing that meets high standards in the areas of thesis, organization, support of ideas, and writing conventions.

1. In an essay, define what home means to you. How has your community, movies or books shaped this definition and your expectations? Your experience of home may be positive or negative. How have your experiences matched or contradicted your definition of “Home?”
2. Write about your own experiences with language. How does language allow you to identify with certain people or groups of people? How does language exclude you from groups and individuals? Consider not only foreign languages but also dialects and slang.
3. Often when we help others, we find that we get more than we give. Emma assists Zena with her poetry. Samnang works with his elders by transcribing their personal histories. Each of them gains more than they expected from their service experience. Describe a service, community building, or political project in which you’ve been involved. What did you give? What did you get in return? What did you learn?
4. Examine another novel that crosses cultures and compare the influence of setting on plot or character motivation in the two novels.

Service Projects

1. Pass along the importance of community service. As a class, create a “Service Fair” for younger students. Identify and discuss volunteer opportunities in your town, city or region. Create display boards that introduce the different service possibilities in your community. Include pictures, describe the tasks required to volunteer at each location, and outline desirable skills. Older students can help younger students identify the talents they have that could be helpful to others.
2. Emma is eager to plan a dance performance to raise funds and help tsunami victims. Learn about the [Tomo: Friendship Through Fiction anthology](#) that raises funds for long-term assistance to teens in the Tohoku area of Japan that was hard-hit by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. What other creative disaster-related fund-raising or service projects can you think of? Identify a recipient group, decide on necessary resources (materials, equipment, venue, budget, adult assistance), develop a timeline, and get to work to make it happen.
3. Read the picture book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr. Learn to fold paper cranes and other animals from origami paper at [Origami Way](#). Identify a group to which the 1,000 cranes might be meaningful and create a community effort to fold and present the cranes as a gift of peace and generosity.





Poetry Writing Prompts from Poems Mentioned in *The Language Inside*

Below are links to the poetry referenced in the book *The Language Inside* along with a poetry writing prompt that relates to each poem. To make this resource a part of your instruction you might:

- Model a full-class discussion, analysis and writing exercise based on one of the poems.
- Encourage students to create original poetry using the prompts and publish the poems on a bulletin board or in a class poetry magazine.
- Include technology by posting their original poetry on a class blog or sharing the PoetryFoundation.org App for smartphones.
- Allow students to create art or illustration based on their original poetry.
- Have the students analyze a poem.
- Present a poem on this list along with another poem from the same poet and teach students to compare and contrast the poems.
- Ask students to research the life of a poet on the list. What influenced their poetry?

Chapter 14

“[Homage to my Hips](#)” by Lucille Clifton (poetryfoundation.org). Write a poem of homage to one of your physical attributes.

“[Early in the Morning](#)” by Li-Young Lee (poetryfoundation.org). Write a poem rich with detail, observation, and insight about a particular routine.

“[Introduction to Poetry](#)” by Billy Collins (poetryfoundation.org; Poetry 180). Write a poem that serves as an introduction to a discipline or subject, either ironic in tone or not.

Chapter 19

“[Otherwise](#)” by Jane Kenyon (Poetry 180). Write a poem of everyday images; try repeating a phrase or sentence throughout the poem, then changing that phrase slightly at the end.

“[The Legend](#)” by Garrett Hongo (poets.org). Write a narrative poem about a news event that had an emotional impact on you.





Poetry Writing Prompts from Poems Mentioned in *The Language Inside* (continued)

Chapter 26

“[God Says Yes to Me](#)” by Kaylin Haught (Poetry 180). Write a first person poem with a strong voice and attitude; try using questions and answers to reveal the speaker’s personality.

“[Painting a Room](#)” by Katia Kapovich (Poetry 180). Write a present-tense poem about a turning point in your life.

Chapter 33

“[Mermaid Song](#)” by Kim Addonizio (poets.org). Write a poem that contains a strong metaphor about whatever or whomever keeps you going.

“[Making a Fist](#)” by Naomi Shihab Nye (poets.org; poetryfoundation.org) Write a narrative poem about a memory that takes on larger significance with time.

Chapter 39

“[Litany for a Hidden Apsara](#)” by Anida Yoeu Ali (atomicshogun.com/writing.htm). Write a poem of repetitive chant; consider focusing on a theme of human rights, children of a certain place, or your personal identity.

Chapter 41

Read all of the poems mentioned in this chapter and write a poem about some sort of journey.

“[Enough](#)” by Suzanne Buffam (poetryfoundation.org). Write a poem titled “Enough” in which “enough” implies either exasperation or adequacy.

“[Running Away Together](#)” by Maxine Kumin (poetryfoundation.org). Write a poem of fantasy about running away.

“[The Boundary](#)” by Bei Dao (poetryfoundation.org). Write a poem about a boundary, either actual or metaphorical.

Chapter 44

“[Patience](#)” by Kay Ryan (poets.org). Write a poem about some quality that is considered a virtue.

“[The Fist](#)” by Derek Walcott (poets.org). Write a poem concerned with the pain of love.





Poetry Writing Prompts from the Poems of Emma, Zena and Samnang

The following poetry prompts are directly related to the poems created by the characters in *The Language Inside*. As above, you might:

- Encourage students to create original poetry using the prompts and publish the poems on a bulletin board or in a class poetry magazine.
 - Include technology by posting their original poetry on a class blog or sharing the PoetryFoundation.org App for smartphones.
 - Allow students to create art or illustration based on their original poetry.
1. In several pages of Chapter 4, Emma lists the destruction she finds in Miyagi Prefecture after the tsunami. Create a list poem of detailed description to tell a story or reveal an emotion.
 2. In Chapter 10, Emma and Zena take turns writing lines to create the poem that begins with “I open the door” (p. 104). Create a collaborative poem or a class [renku](#).
 3. In Chapter 14, Zena and Emma share poems about breasts (p. 136, 139). Zena’s poem takes off from the poem “[Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird](#)” by Wallace Stevens. Write your own Thirteen Ways or Fourteen Ways poem offering different perspectives on a single object.
 4. In Chapter 24, (p. 242, 243), Emma creates short poems about fear and hope. Choose two opposite emotions and write two short poems to show those emotions.
 5. In Chapter 25, (p. 250, 251) Emma gathers her thoughts into several short poems. Try writing your thoughts in brief poetry snippets.
 6. In Chapter 26, Zena’s “My Sister Says” poem builds through repetition. Write a poem about someone who played a role as a helper, like Zena’s sister and the OT—“angels” as Emma describes them.
 7. In Chapter 26, Emma suggests writing a poem about “what we’d like to see through a window” then makes several short lists (p. 268, 269), and Zena shares her poem “What I See.” Write your own poem about what you’d like to see through a window.
 8. In Chapter 33, Zena composes a poem about her stroke (p. 336), for which Emma suggests the title “Beached.” Write a poem portraying some kind of loss or other strong emotion through simile and/or metaphor.
 9. In Chapter 35, Emma makes a list poem about the passage of time (p. 367) that begins “in a year the snowcap.” Write a similar poem titled “In a Year” or “In a Month” or “In a Second” about time, place, change and emotion.





Poetry Writing Prompts from the Poems of Emma, Zena and Samnang (continued)

10. In Chapter 36 Emma writes the poem “Kamakura Buddha with Leap Sok” (p. 380). Write a poem about a holiday ritual or a poem about seeing something through another person’s eyes.
11. In Chapter 41, Emma tells us that Serey reads an ode poem to her *kben* (p. 432). Read some odes by Gary Soto and Pablo Neruda and write your own ode to an everyday object.
12. In Chapter 41, Zena shares her poem “As a Mermaid” (p. 433). Write a poem on the theme of transformation, masks or costumes.
13. In Chapter 41, Emma reads aloud her poem “Lonely Is” (p. 435). Write a poem that begins with an emotion plus “is,” such as “Frustration Is.” Avoid cliches.
14. In Chapter 41, Samnang reads his prose poem “Coins” (p. 437). Write a poem about a traditional custom. Or write a poem about an object depicted in three situations.
15. In Chapter 44, Zena shares her poem “Hair” (p. 473) about her daughter’s hair that she longs to touch. Write a poem about something missed or longed for.





Activities and Inter-Curriculum Projects

Use the following activities to deepen student experience of *The Language Inside*, connect with curriculum and create integrated studies projects. Many of the activities include hyperlinks and could be grouped as part of an online scavenger hunt.

1. In Chapter 11, Samnang mentions a refugee camp that the patient Chea Pen is writing about, and in Chapter 12, Emma learns more about the Khmer Rouge regime and the killing fields of Cambodia. Research the Cambodian genocide that took place under Pol Pot's rule from 1975 to 1979; World Without Genocide provides an [overview](#). Present your findings as a computer slide show, on a display, as a timeline, or in a writing piece.
2. Emma is proficient at Japanese and writing kanji (Chinese characters adopted for the Japanese language). Chapters 6, 37 and 41 include some kanji characters. Learn more about Japanese kanji by reading *Kanji Pict-O-Graphix*, by Michael Rowley (Stone Bridge Press), or visit the Learning Japanese section of CosCom.co.jp or these kanji [WikiBooks](#) and try writing some Japanese kanji characters.
3. Visit the [Angkor Dance Troupe](#) website and watch videos in the Learn a Dance! section, especially the Monkey Dance, the Mermaid Dance and the Fishing Dance, all referenced in *The Language Inside*. Try learning the Fishing Dance, the dance that Emma is eager to learn. If possible, invite dancers to perform and teach Cambodian dance.
4. Research Japanese Bon Odori folk songs and dances, such as the *tanko bushi* that Emma wants to teach others as part of her fundraising idea. Watch this [how-to video](#) for the *tanko bushi*, *Tokyo ondo* and *dai Tokyo ondo* dances. If possible, invite an instructor in Japanese folk dance to perform and instruct.
5. Emma and Toby learned the *soran bushi* in elementary school in Japan, and Emma later was on a *yosakoi* dance team. Watch this [soran bushi tutorial](#) (in Japanese with some English) and this [full performance](#). Research the *soran bushi* folk song and dance. Research *yosakoi* dance. If possible, arrange for a performance with instruction.
6. Learn the [Yuyake koyake](#) song, which is played on chimes over loudspeakers in Kamakura and other areas of Japan in late afternoon ([listen on this video](#)) as a signal for children to stop playing and go home.
7. On a map of Japan, find Kamakura (in Kanagawa Prefecture); Tokyo; and Miyagi Prefecture in Tohoku. On a map of Cambodia, find Phnom Penh and Battambang. On a map of the U.S. find Lowell, Boston, and Plum Island—all in Massachusetts; and find Vermont.





Activities and Inter-Curriculum Projects (continued)

8. Research the city of Lowell, Massachusetts. In addition to Cambodians, what other immigrant groups have settled in Lowell over the years? Why has the city attracted immigrants? Visit [US Census Data Quick Facts Lowell, MA](#).
9. Download the [Annual Flow Report on Refugees and Asylees: 2012](#) from the US Department Homeland Security. Use the data from Table 3 (or another data set) to graph the Country of Nationality for Refugee Arrivals over a period of years.
10. Watch the film *Monkey Dance*, directed by Julie Mallozzi, about three teens in the Angkor Dance Troupe in Lowell, Massachusetts.
11. Watch the film *The Flute Player*, directed by Jocelyn Glatzner, or read the book *Never Fall Down* by Patricia McCormick, both about Arn Chorn-Pond. Discuss how traditional music connects past, contemporary, and future generations. View the book trailer for [Never Fall Down](#).
12. Learn about, sample, or even try cooking some Cambodian or Japanese foods. For Cambodian or Khmer food, check out the [“13 Cambodian Foods You Should Know”](#) from [Serious Eats](#). Try making the soup that Emma orders using the [Phnom Penh Noodle Soup recipe](#) shared on Khmer Connection. For Japanese food try some [noodle recipes from Savory Japan](#).
13. Explore the books and films mentioned in the Recommended Resources of *The Language Inside*. See the list in the book and on the following page.

About the Author:



Holly Thompson, a native of Massachusetts, is a longtime resident of Japan. She is the author of the verse novels *The Language Inside* and *Orchards*, winner of the APALA Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature; the novel *Ash*; and the picture book *The Wakame Gatherers*. She is also the editor of *Tomo: Friendship Through Fiction—An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories*. Holly Thompson teaches creative writing and serves as the regional advisor for the Japan chapter of the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. Visit her at [hatbooks.com](#)





Recommended Resources

Books

When Broken Glass Floats by Chanrithy Him
First They Killed My Father by Loung Ung
Never Fall Down by Patricia McCormick
Roots and Wings by Many Ly
Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods by Denise Haywood
Oh Maha, Mount Dangrek edited by Samkhann C. Khoeun
Look Up for Yes by Julia Tavalaro

Films

Monkey Dance directed by Julie Mallozzi
The Flute Player directed by Jocelyn Glatzner
The Killing Fields directed by Roland Joffé
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly directed by Julian Schnabel

Websites

Angkor Dance Troupe www.angkordance.org
Poetry Foundation www.poetryfoundation.org
Poets.org www.poets.org
Poetry 180 www.loc.gov/poetry/180/
Japanese Folk Dance Institute of New York www.japanesefolkdance.org
More resources at Holly Thompson's website www.hatbooks.com

