

*Teaching and Managing a Project-based English Course to the College Students in  
Diverse Levels of English Proficiency*

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**Abstract**

It is generally recognized in Japan today that having high -level English skills is certainly a big advantage for college students to open up their future career. Japanese colleges are facing increasing societal demand for a better English curriculum that fosters both communicative and academic English skills. The project-based English course, which is practiced at the College of Sport and Health Science of Ritsumeikan University, focuses on development of academic communication skills. In this course students practice the communicative academic skills of English such as, 1: how to deliver a group-based oral English presentation including a debate and panel discussion, 2: how to write an academic paper in English, 3: how to develop research skills based on their own interest. Although it is shown by the distribution of their TOEIC IP scores that there are English proficiency gaps among the students, the questionnaire survey reveals that most of them regard themselves as contributors to the accomplishment of the course because it is designed to require them to be a part of the group research. This study proposes that project-based English course should be student-interest-oriented and build on a series of academic tasks that need all the students to take part in.

## Literature reviews

### The concept of project-based learning

Project-based learning is widely adopted as part of the EFL/ESL curriculum and our English program is developed based on project-based learning. Laffey et al. (1998:74) explain the basic concept of project-based learning. It is a form of contextual instruction that places great emphasis on students problem-finding and framing, and which is often carried out over extended periods of time. Blumenfeld et al. (1991:372) discuss project-based learning further. It places learners in realistic, contextualized problem-solving environments. In doing so, it provides learners with a link between phenomena in the classroom and real-life experiences. Although project-based learning requires active engagement of learners' effort over an extended period of time, it promotes an extended view of subject matter disciplines rather than a narrow view of subject matter disciplines. However, it is important to note that both teachers and learners need to understand their roles within project-based program. The next part discusses roles of both teachers and learners in a project-based program.

### Roles of teachers and students under project-based learning

Within the framework of project-based learning, the roles of teachers and students are different from those of traditional lecture style classes. Teachers need to be either coaches or facilitators who give opportunities for learners to access to information, who guide learners to make tasks more manageable, and who assess progress, provide feedback and evaluate overall results (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Students need to fit their projects into curriculum objects but they can decide their projects based on their personal experience and interests. Students also will need to organize and do their project work collaboratively with their peers, and will need to find mentors, resources and guidance in order to achieve quality outcomes (Laffey et al., 1998). Abe (1998) points out learner-centered program enhance learners' communication skills and social skills such as leadership in a group, responsibility, and collaborative skill.

### Effectiveness of introducing group work in class

Under project-based learning circumstances, learners sometimes find it difficult to adjust to the learner centered style of class. In particular, Japanese students who

entered their university directly from their high school are often not familiar with conducting their research projects. Thus students of the first year in particular find it difficult to study English under the project-based learning curriculum. In order to help students' learning, introducing group work for learners might help reduce their pressure from the study. There are several studies which support the idea that group work in class is effective for learners to enhance their learning ability. For example, Adam et al. (1990:6) explain that under collaborative group work, students learn how to jointly search for information for their research questions by individuals or the group. They learn techniques for analyzing, interrupting, negotiating and communicating their information as a team. Instead of the traditional emphasis on communicative individual performance, students encourage each other to research their topics, and come up with group products. Long and Potter (1985) explain the positive effects of group work for learners of their target language. Firstly, group work increases not only opportunities for learners to practice their target language in their groups, but also improves the quality of learners' speaking skills. Secondly, group work helps learners learn from each other and it enhances learners' motivation. Sugino (1994) also points out the effectiveness of introducing group work into language classes. According to her study, she found that small group work facilitates learners' language abilities. Johnson et al. (2001) found a further evidence of group activity in class. They found that combination of a large group activity and small group activity resulted in greater group productivity and higher educational achievement than did a large group activity alone.

### The aim of this study

There are two aims in this study.

- 1: to investigate whether or not students' initial English proficiency affects to any significant degree their attitude toward and self-confidence in accomplishment of the project-based course.
- 2: to find how the project based English course can support those who are relatively lower level of English than other students'.

### Our project-based learning (Project-based English)

Our English program is developed based on project-based learning. Bluemenfeld et

al. (1991) explain that project-based learning can be adapted to different types of learners and learning situations. Our department, the College of Sport and Health Science at Ritsumeikan University in Japan, arranges project-based learning into English classes. English is a compulsory subject in particular for both the first year and the second year students. Our department offers two English subjects each semester: Project-based English 1 to 4 and Skills workshop 1 to 4. Skills workshop class is the class which students learn English for Project-based English class. In Skills workshop class, students learn grammar, listening, speaking, and reading skills which are necessary for conducting their research in their Project-based English classes.

Two tables below explain both objectives and assessments of Project-based English.

Objectives	P1 (1st semester) 15 weeks	P2 (2nd semester) 15 weeks
1 <sup>st</sup> year	We will learn the basic research skills such as the presentation and writing.	We will develop our research skills. We learn how to do an interview and questionnaires.
	P3 (1 <sup>st</sup> semester) 15 weeks	P4 (2 <sup>nd</sup> semester) 15 weeks
2nd year	Using P1 + P2 skills, we aim to enhance our research skills with your group members. We are able to deliver a mini debate and mini panel discussion.	Using P1 + P2 + P3 skills, we focus on learning how to write an academic paper.

Assessment	P1 (1st semester)	P2 (2nd semester)
1st year	✓ Mid term presentation (3 minutes)	✓ Mid term presentation ✓ Final presentation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Final presentation (5 minutes)</li><li>✓ Final paper (around 600 words)</li><li>✓ Attendance</li><li>✓ Homework</li><li>✓ Participation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Final paper (600 to 1000 words)</li><li>✓ Attendance</li><li>✓ Homework</li><li>✓ Participation</li></ul>
	P3 (1st semester)	P4 (2nd semester)
2nd year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Mini debate</li><li>✓ Mini panel discussion</li><li>✓ Final presentation</li><li>✓ Final paper (1000 words)</li><li>✓ Attendance</li><li>✓ Homework</li><li>✓ Participation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Final presentation</li><li>✓ Final paper (1500 to 2000 words)</li><li>✓ Attendance</li><li>✓ Homework</li><li>✓ Participation</li></ul>

Project-based English 1 (P1) is for the first year students and is taught in the first semester. In P1, students learn basic skills of how to deliver their presentation in English, how to research, and how to write an essay in English. Students decide their topic in two or three weeks and they start their research. They can choose whatever topic they want to research but they often choose their topics which are related to sport areas. Mid term presentation is three minutes and the final presentation is 5 minutes. The final essay consists of two or three pages, about 600 words.

Project-based English 2 (P2) is for the first year students and is taught in the second semester. The major difference between P1 and P2 is that students conduct both interviews and questionnaires in their research in P2. Students need to include either interview or questionnaire data in their final paper. Thus, P2 provides students the entry level of the academic skill.

Project-based English 3 (P3) is for the 2nd year students which is held in the first semester. In P3, students are required to make a small group (4 or 5 members in one group) to do their research. In between week one to three, small groups in class should be formed and each group needs to decide their group topic. Each group should have a moderator who is the leader of the group. Once the moderator is decided, other members need to take their roles for their research. P3 focuses on oral skills and therefore students are required to do three presentations: a mini debate, a mini panel discussion and a final presentation. In the mini debate, each group is divided into a pro and con team and the moderator takes a role of the chair. In the mini panel discussion, each group member becomes a panelist and the moderator takes the role of chair again. In the final presentation, each group can chose to do either the debate or panel discussion. However, the authors encourage students to do a panel discussion since they think it is easier for them to do. Students also need to submit their final written presentation which they need to summarize their research on the paper. Each student needs to write about 1000 words.

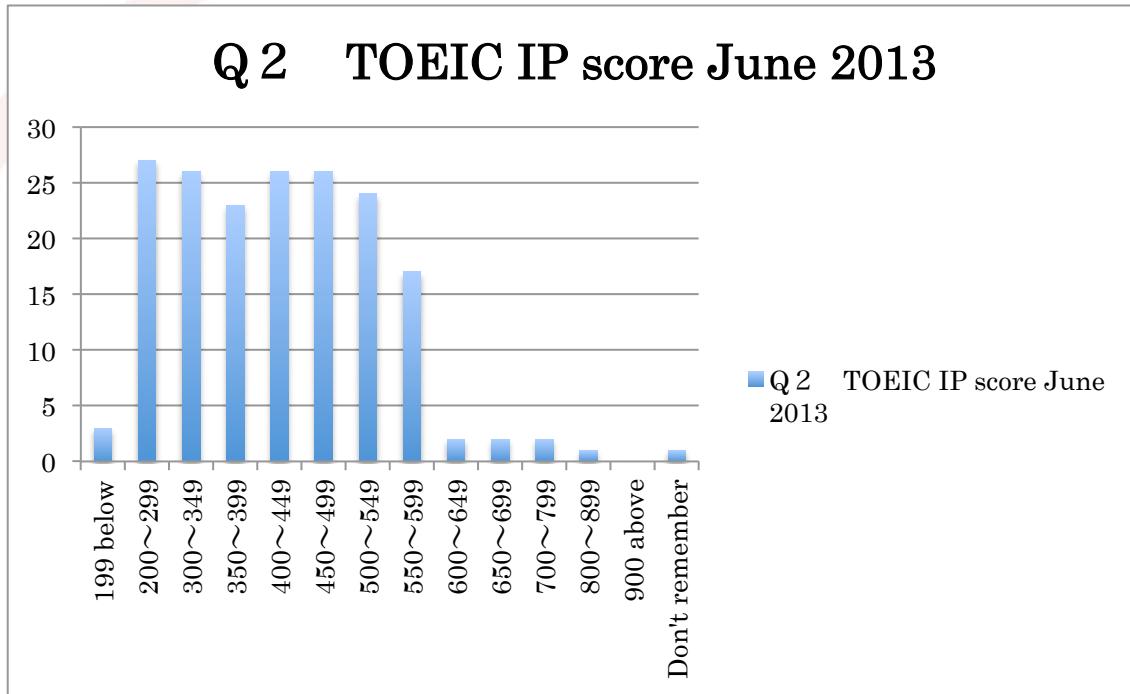
Project-based English 4 (P4) is for the second year students and held in the second semester. It focuses on academic writing. Students can do their research on their own but the authors require them to make groups to do their research. This is because all P classes have mixed level of English learners and therefore the authors believe that group work will allow students to learn from each other. In P4, students are required to do a final presentation and to write a final paper.

## Methodology

The authors of this study asked our students to do questionnaires at the end of the first semester (July, 2013). We distributed questionnaires to 11 classes for 2nd year students since our 2nd year students had to do a group research in P3. Thus the authors of this study were able to see how our students coped with group work through the semester. In P3, once students decide their group, they stay in the same group through the whole semester. Although some groups sometimes break up in the middle of the semester, most groups cooperate together in their group. We got 180 replies. The original questions in Japanese which we asked are put in the appendix section. In addition, a translated version of the original questionnaire in English is put in the appendix section.

## Results

For Q2 (What is your TOEIC score in June?), the graph is provided below.



The range of students' TOEIC score is between below 199 to 899. TOEIC score 400 is thought to be a high school English level but 79 students got their TOEIC score under 399. The average score of our students is between 400 and 449.

For Q3 (How often did you bring your computer in this class?), the graph is also provided below.

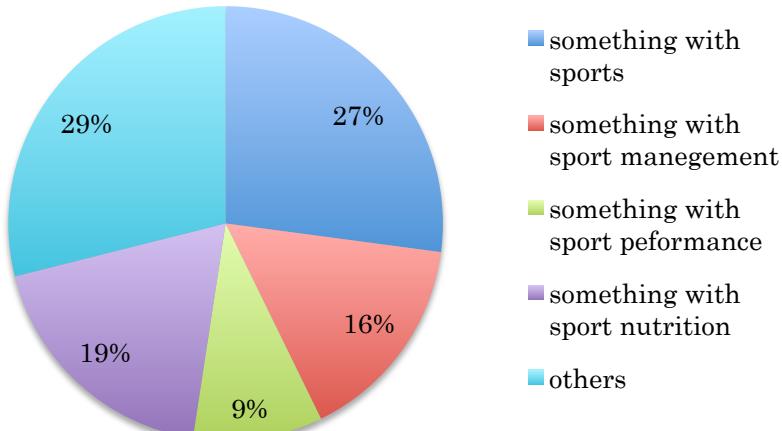
### Q3 how often did you bring your computer in this class?



75 percent of participants answered ‘every time’ and 15 percent of participants answered ‘almost every time’. Thus, the total of 90 percent of participants brought their computers in their class almost every time.

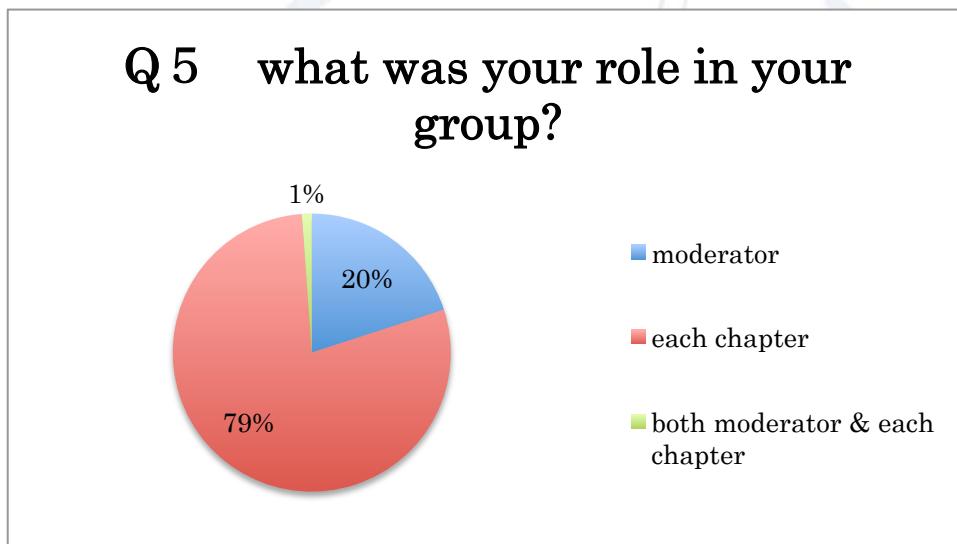
For Q4 (What was your group research topic for this subject?), the graph is provided below.

### Q4 what was your group research topic?



Choice of students' research topic varies. Among four areas of sport related topics, the most popular topic was sport education which is followed by the topic of nutrition. The topic of sport management comes third and the topic of sport performance comes last. Surprisingly, 29 percent of participants of this study chose the topic that is not relevant to sport areas.

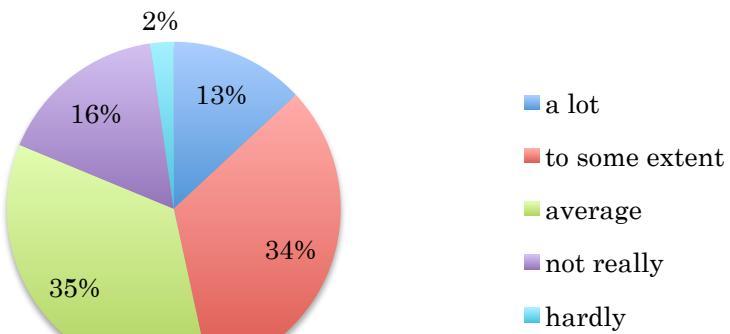
For Q5 (What was your role in your group for your research?), the graph is provided below.



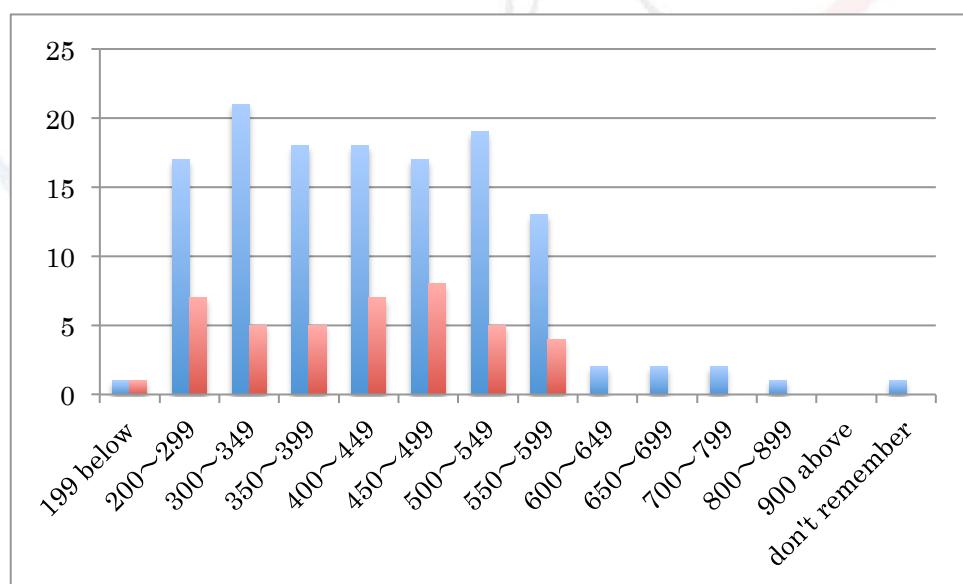
20 percent of our participants took a role of a moderator and 79 percent of them took a charge of each chapter. Interestingly, only 1 percent of our participants took roles of both a moderator and each chapter.

For Q6 (How much did you contribute to your group research?), the graph is provided below.

## Q 6 how much did you think you contributed to your group?

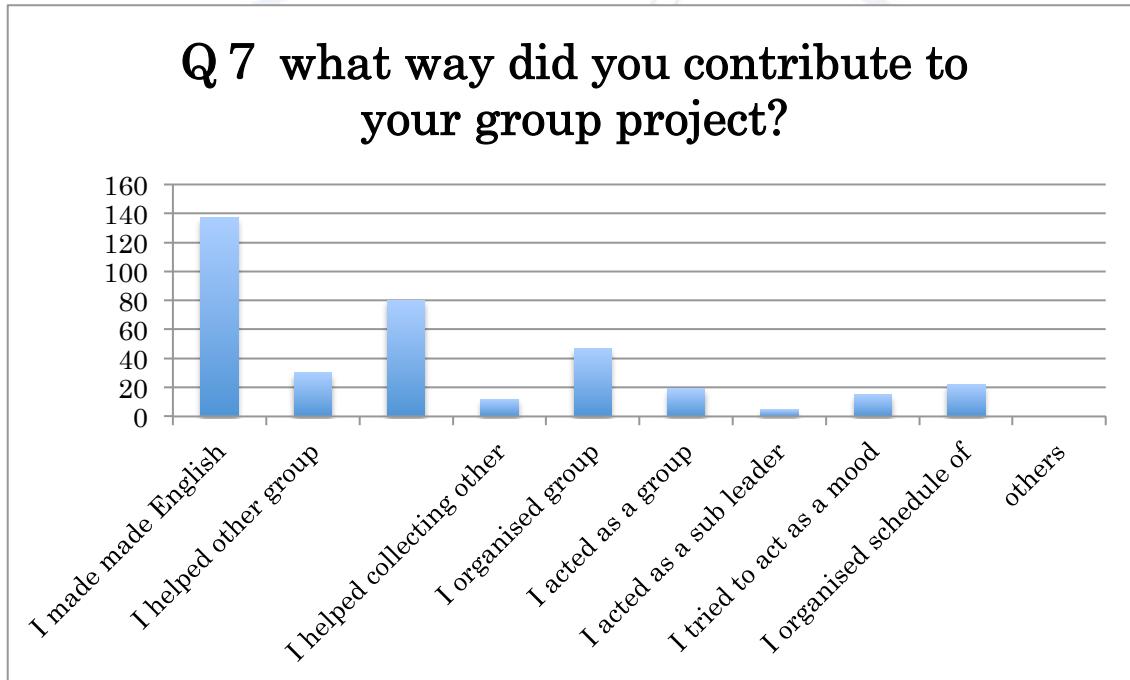


13 percent of the participants answered a great amount of contribution and 34 percent of the participants answered to some extent of contribution. 35 percent of the participant answered average contribution. Thus the total of 82 percent of the participants answered this question positively and it suggests that most students contributed to their group project. However, The total of 18 percent of the participants answered negatively that students did not contribute to their group projects.



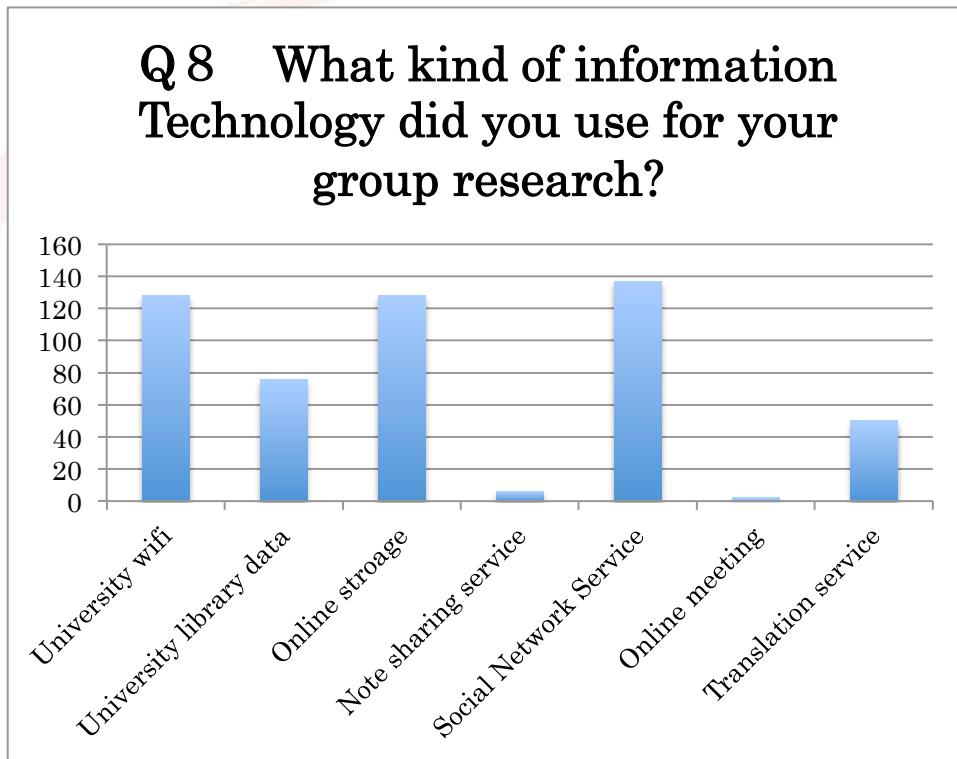
The graph above shows whether any relationship between TOEIC scores and satisfaction towards the subject. The blue color shows that students were satisfied with the subject while the red color shows that students were not satisfied with the subject. Although there is lots of satisfaction, there is no relationship between TOEIC scores and their satisfaction towards the subject.

For Q7 (If you answered yes above, then in what way did you contribute to your group research? Please choose answers as many answers as you want), the graph is provided below.



The most popular answer was ‘I made my part in English on my own.’ which is followed by the answer ‘I collected data for my part on my own’. These two answers suggest that each member took responsibility for their own part in their group. Two answers: ‘I organized making power point slides, manuscripts for our presentation, submitting our group assignments’ and ‘I helped my group member’s writing in English’ are come to the third and fourth most popular answers. These two answers show that group members supported each other and group projects were collaboratively done.

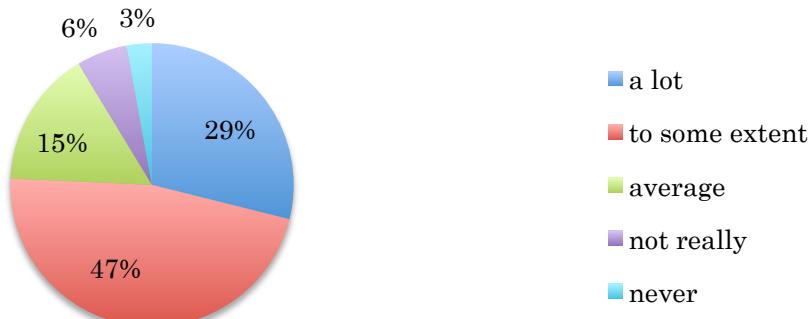
For Q8 (What kind of information technology did you use for your group research in this class?), the graph is provided below.



The most popular answer for this question was ‘SNS such as LINE or Twitter’. ‘Wifi at my university’ and ‘Online storage such as Dropbox or Google drive’ are the second most popular answers.

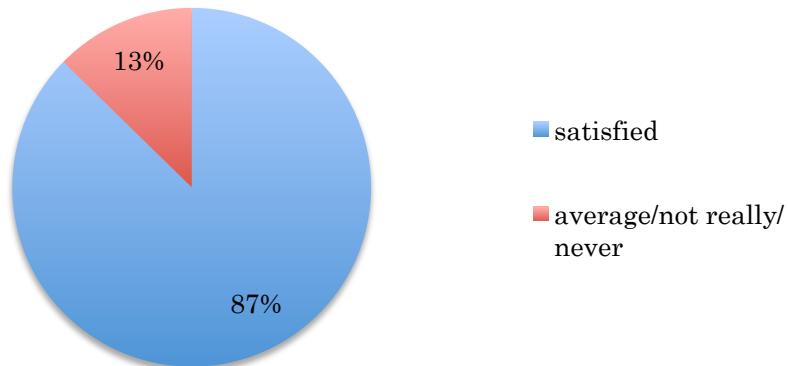
For Q9 (What extent did you think you achieved your aim in this subject?), the graph is provided below.

## Q9 What extent did you think you achieved your aim of this subject?



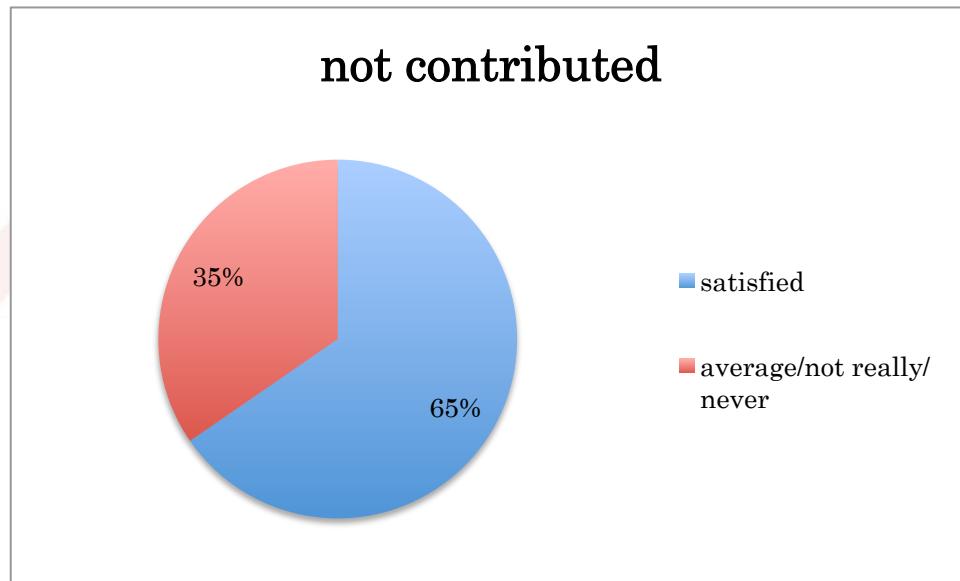
The total of 76 percent (a lot and to some extent) of students answered that they thought they achieved their goal. Only nine percent of the student answered that they did not think they achieved their goals.

## contributed



The graph above shows the relationship between students' satisfaction and contribution to their group. 87 percent of those who answered that they thought they contributed to their group project said they were satisfied with the subject. 13 percent of those who answered that they thought they contributed to their group

project said they were not satisfied with the subject.



The graph above shows the relationship between students' satisfaction and non-contribution towards their group project. The total of 65 percent who answered they did not contribute to their group project were still satisfied with the subject. 35 percent of students who did not contribute to the group work answered that they were not satisfied with the subject.

## Discussions

Firstly, the result of this study showed that no relationship between students' TOEIC scores and students' contribution/satisfaction towards this subject was observed. In other words, those who were in low scores on TOEIC thought they either contributed to their group project or were satisfied with their group project. However, those who were in higher scores on TOEIC test did not always contribute to their group project or were not satisfied with their group project.

There are some possible reasons which might contribute to this result. First of all, TOEIC test does not include tests of both oral and writing parts. Our students took TOEIC IP, which tests only reading and listening skills, as one of their requirements in their program. Since the result of TOEIC test is still popularly used for

job-hunting in Japan, our university encourages students to take TOEIC for their future job hunting. Therefore, students' TOEIC test scores do not reflect on their writing and speaking skills. In P3, students need to do 3 presentations including a mini debate, a mini panel discussion and the final presentation. Also they need to write the final report around 1000 words. There are those who are not good at listening or reading but who are good at writing or speaking in our classes. Both academic writing and speaking skills are very important skills for succeeding in study at university. For instance, Robin (2003) points out the importance of academic writing skills for learners of English. His study found that many learners of English who do not have sufficient academic writing skills find it very difficult to cope with studies at university. Berman and Cheng (2010) find on their study that non-native speakers of English in their study felt both speaking and writing skills are more difficult than the other two skills: reading and listening. In particular, they imply teaching academic writing and speaking skills for postgraduate students would bring postgraduate students benefit. For instance, they emphasize teaching academic orals skills such as asking and answering questions, how to participate in group discussions, delivering oral presentations. As for academic writing skills, students will need to learn preparation of essay examination, a formal academic writing, and a skill reported by many of them to be difficult.

Secondly, collaborative work in a small group might contribute to students' satisfaction/contribution towards the subjects. Sport students are indeed very good at working in a group since some of them belong to university sport clubs and others used to belong to sport clubs when they were high school students. Our students learnt collaborative skills to work in a group in their sport clubs and they applied what they experienced in their sport clubs to their research project in their class. However, there is a negative aspect of conducting group activities in class. For instance, Xue (2013) reports that those who are low level in English abilities in particular for both speaking and listening found in difficult to participate in group work in their ESL class. Xue explains that their level of English directly resulted in their passive participations in-group activities. In order to encourage learners to participate in-group activities, the authors of this study believe that teachers need to consider learners' characteristics when they make groups in class. Each group needs at least one leader who can organize the group and look after other group members.

Thirdly, project-based learning could motivate students to learn English. The result of our study showed that quite high numbers of students answered that they were satisfied with their projects. Blumenfeld et al. (1991) explain that when learners choose their projects for long-term investigations, learners tend to be motivated by their projects. Although there will be individual preference towards project-based learning, projects can be designed to enhance most students' interest and value, including variety, challenge, choice, cooperation, and finding answers for real questions. In our classes, the authors try to encourage our students to decide their topic which is something relevant to their fields: sport education, sport management, sport performance and nutrition. However, students can choose any topic for their projects which interests them.

## Conclusion

Our first research question was to investigate whether or not students' initial English proficiency affects to any significant degree their attitude toward and self-confidence in accomplishment of the project-based course. In order to answer this question, the authors of this study give an answer for it as no. As the result of this study showed, there was no relationship between students' English proficiency level and their attitude toward the subject.

This study also had the second question, how the project based English course can support those who are relatively lower level of English than other students'. To answer the second question, collaborative group work helps those who are in particular low level of English. Advanced learners of English often support low-level learners of English. Moreover, selecting research topics is also important to help low-level learners. When learners choose their favourite topic to research, they are normally motivated to keep researching their topics. Thus English teachers will need to pay attention when their students make a group and select their topics for their research. If a group does not have any leader who can lead the group, then it is hard for them to work collaboratively. If learners choose topics in which they are not really interested, then they might give up their topics in the middle of the semester.

This research was imposed on students who belong to the department of sport and health science. They are very familiar with working as a group because many of them belong to their sport clubs. As a further research, it is interesting to investigate those who belong to the other department. Those who do not belong to sport clubs might perform differently when they study English under the project-based learning.

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