

Cooperative Learning in the EFL University Classroom: Students' Discoveries

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Abstract

Many classrooms in schools throughout Japan still adopt the traditional “teacher-centered approach”, where the student learning is the responsibility of the teacher and who is the active entity in the classroom. In many cases, the role of the student is a passive one. At many universities in Japan, students expect to be “spoon-fed” in their learning process; not speak, but listen and therefore assume that this is their role as a learner. The characteristics of the collectivist, passive, teacher-dependent Japanese learner (Littlewood, 1999) may strongly inhibit them from being able to take responsibility for their own individual learning, or even learning why it is important to be an autonomous learner. In particular, it may be argued that many Japanese students are still not aware that knowing how to learn and work collaboratively is a vital 21st century skill. Inside the L2 university classroom in particular, students still don't have enough opportunity to develop their communication and collaboration skills in doing social interactive activities such as problem-solving and critical thinking. This article will argue the importance of promoting cooperative learning in the university-level EFL classroom and briefly analyze responses about university students' and teachers' experiences of cooperative learning in the classroom. The author will then conclude by giving suggestions on ways to promote cooperative learning in the university classroom.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, learner autonomy, cooperative learning, 21st Century skills

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1. Introduction

“...if teachers spend five to seven hours a day saying, “Help each other. Share, work together, discuss the material, explain” and make it clear that “you’re responsible not only for your own learning but for the learning of your peers” – if they promote cooperation among students – they will look at their colleagues as potential cooperators” (*an excerpt by D. Johnson from Educational Leadership quoted by McCafferty et al. 2006*).

Trilling and Fadel (2009), the founders and Co-chairs of the Standards, Assessment and Professional Development Committee of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, claim that the two core skills that are in high demand in the 21st century are communication and collaboration skills. One way that students can become prepared to use these key work skills is through cooperative learning in the classroom. In using this instruction method with my students in the EFL classroom, I see not only improvement in L2 fluency, but improvements in their cognitive and social development, self-esteem, confidence and in their motivation to learn.

The purpose of this article is to briefly discuss the advantages of cooperative learning in the EFL classroom and discuss the students’ experiences by analyzing the responses of student and teacher questionnaires on group work in the classroom.

First, I will explore the definitions of cooperative learning and a brief review of past literature on the concept. I will then go on to discuss the responses of the student and teacher questionnaires on their experiences with cooperative learning in the classroom. I will then conclude this article by suggesting ways how teachers can encourage cooperative learning in the EFL classroom. This article is not intended to cover all of the aspects of cooperative learning and its implementation; but instead to aim in providing the reader with a brief overview of this concept of learning, to explore some factors of its effectiveness, and offer suggestions to help encourage cooperative learning in the EFL classroom.

1.1 Definitions of Cooperative Learning

Many researchers (Gokhale 1995, Johnson & Johnson 1978, 1988, Oxford 1997) have defined cooperative learning as a concept of grouping students for the purpose of achieving a common academic goal. Each student is held responsible for each other’s learning, as well as their own, and are encouraged and motivated to increase the learning of one another. In cooperative learning, all members of the group share the same success or failure in the group task at hand. McCafferty et. al (2006) states that cooperative learning is a instructional method that encourages students to draw upon already developed interpersonal and problem-solving skills and to utilize their prior knowledge and experiences (p.154). Cooperative learning has been characterized as positive interdependence, which encourages cooperation and a feeling of support (p.5). Oxford (1997) explains that cooperative learning is based six principles (see Appendix 1): 1) positive interdependence; 2) accountability, 3) team formation; 4) team size; 5) cognitive development; and 6) social development.

Several studies on cooperative learning (McCafferty, Jacobs, Iddings, 2006, Shachar & Sharan, 1988) suggest that it is a type of learning associated with improvement in achievement, higher-level thinking, self-esteem and inter-ethnic relations and motivation. Cooperative learning in the multi-level classroom functions so as to allow for heterogeneity in level of performance, interest and participation within each of the several small groups formed within the classroom. (Shachar & Sharan, p.7, 1988). Cooperative Learning groups may provide students with “the opportunity to contribute to the group’s progress and thereby enjoy some academic status among peers while learning” (Shachar & Sharan, 1988:7).

1.2 Learner Autonomy and Cooperative Learning

In terms of its relationship to learner autonomy, cooperative learning help students develop into life-long learners by ‘enhancing their abilities and their inclinations to plan, control and evaluate their own learning’ (Wenden 1991, as quoted by McCafferty et al., 2006:26). The collaboration that occurs in cooperative learning groups fits well with notions of learner autonomy as students are given a large role in controlling their own learning process (Macaro 1997, as quoted by McCafferty, et al. 2006:26). McCafferty goes on to suggest that certain cooperative learning approaches foster a high degree of learner autonomy because they provide students with the freedom to explore their own interests and to organize group activities (p.26). One example is from the Sharan & Sharan 1992 group investigation where student groups choose their own topics and decide how to research them in preparation for sharing what they learn with the entire class. (McCafferty et al., 2006:26).

1.3 Benefits of cooperative learning

According to Johnson & Johnson (1988), students are more positive about each other when they learn cooperatively than when they learn alone, competitively, or individualistically, regardless of factors such as differences in ability and ethnic background. They argue that students are more effective interpersonally as a result of working cooperatively than when they work alone, competitively or individualistically. Students with cooperative experiences have a better ability to take the perspective of others, are more positive about taking part in controversy, have developed interaction skills, and have a more positive attitude about working with others than students from competitive or individualistic settings.

Cooperative learning has been employed as an educational medium for promoting positive intergroup relations (Shachar & Sharan 1988: 7). Jacobs and McCafferty (2006) argue that students should learn in a variety of ways, where instruction should sometimes place students in contexts outside their comfort zone so that their learning repertoire stretches beyond their preferred means of learning “...students should come to recognize, understand and value the diversity that exists among them. They further claim that another skill that may be developed in cooperative learning is interpersonal intelligence – this involves showing respect to others and knowing how to understand and interact successfully with peers” (p.25). A small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting, and usually a more supportive environment in which to try out

embryonic SL skills. Tsui (1996) found student-student collaboration to be an effective means of reducing debilitating anxiety among her L2 learners. Long and Porter (1985:211) believed that this “more supportive environment” may also increase motivation (as quoted by McCafferty, 2006:26). Oxford (1997) suggests that cooperative learning helps the development of social skills such as turn taking and active listening (p.445). Students working in small teams on collective tasks have been the subject of hundreds of studies. All the research arrives at the same conclusion - there are significant benefits for students who work together on learning activities compared to students who work alone. The benefits include both greater individual and collective knowledge growth, better confidence and motivation levels, and improved social interactions and feelings toward other students. (Trilling and Fadel 2009:108-109).

Trilling and Fadel (2009) claim that in cooperation learning, students can learn how to collaborate, meaning learning how to work effectively and respectfully with diverse people, learning to be flexible and willing to be helpful, compromise in achieving a common goal, assume shared responsibility for collaborative work, and value individual contributions made by the member of their group.

Research suggests that students with lower level ability benefit from cooperative learning as much as high level ability learners. High level learners gain a sense of leadership to helping their peers understand the material and the driving force in working for their group’s success. Lower achievers can receive help from not only the teacher, but their group members, and as a result, feel greater sense of motivation, belonging and confidence (Johnson et al. 1991, quoted by Mccafferty et.al. 2006:33).

According to Gokhale (1995), the active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants in the group but also promotes critical thinking. Johnson and Johnson (1986) claim that there is convincing evidence to show that cooperative teams achieve at higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work quietly as individuals. This shared learning gives students the chance to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their own learning and therefore become critical thinkers.

Gokhale (1995), Trilling & Fadel (2009) claim that future 21 century workforce, workers will need to know how to working together with other people as a team in thinking creatively, solving problems and making decisions as a team. Therefore, the students can develop their teamwork and critical-thinking skills through collaborative learning in the classroom and be ready to succeed in their future jobs, whatever they may be.

In a study conducted by Gokhale (1995), it examined the effectiveness of individual learning versus collaborative learning in enhancing drill-and-practice skills and critical-thinking skills. The participants of this study consisted of 48 undergraduate students enrolled in a industrial technology course at a U.S. university, with 24 students participating in the collaborative learning group and 24 students participating in the individual learning group. The individual learning group were instructed to complete a worksheet by themselves at their own level and rate. The collaborative group were first

briefed on the collaborative learning structure and process before being given instructions for their task. As a result of this research study, though both methods of instruction were found to be equally effective in gaining factual knowledge, it was concluded that collaborative learning fostered the development of critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas and evaluation of other's ideas.

Johnson & Johnson's research (an authority on cooperative learning, in their extensive research on using this method of instruction) They conducted 122 studies from 1924 to 1980) suggests that: 1) students achieve more in cooperative interaction than in competitive or individualistic interaction; and 2) students are more positive about school, subject areas and teachers or professors when they are structured to work cooperatively

Compared to competitive and individualistic learning experiences, cooperative learning is more effective in promoting intrinsic motivation, and task achievement, generating higher order thinking skills, improving attitudes toward the subject, developing academic peer norms, heightening self-esteem and altruistic relationships, and lowering anxiety and prejudice (Oxford 1997:445).

2 Student Questionnaire Survey

2.1 The students

In order to find out what Japanese students think about cooperative learning and their personal experiences in the classroom, I conducted a questionnaire survey on the topic of Japanese university students' attitudes on learning together in groups in the classroom. (See Appendix 2). The students from whom I collected my data were undergraduate students studying at a private university located in the Kansai region of Japan. The students were enrolled in the Faculties of Business Administration and Economics, and they were students whom I had personally taught in the classroom. I had taught these students English oral communication and academic writing using cooperative learning methods in the classroom. A total of 90 undergraduate students answered the questionnaire. It asked 10 multiple-choice questions, offering at least four choices of answers per question. Some questions asked for further comments and details regarding the answer that they selected.

2.2 Summary of responses and discussion

Some responses in particular which I felt were significant to this study on Japanese university students' attitudes towards their learning will be briefly discussed below.

When asked whether or not they liked doing group work in class (Question 1), most students (73%) who answered the questionnaire replied with "Strongly agree". When asked why (Question 3), students chose the following reasons:

- "I could speak freely and say my opinion".
- "It was fun talking together with other people"
- "I liked working in groups better than working alone in class"

These replies may suggest that Japanese students enjoy having some sort of interaction with other students in classroom setting. They become educationally stimulated and are engaged to try learning new and different things. The remaining students (27%) who

replied with “Disagree”, chose the following reasons (Question 2):

- “It was difficult to speak English”.
- “I cannot say my opinion/I am too shy to say my opinion”
- “ I like to work alone more in class”.

These comments may be interpreted that many Japanese students suffer from low self-confidence and low motivation in communicating with other students in L2, and have had little exposure and opportunity to socially interact and speak with their fellow students in the classroom.

When asked whether doing group work in class made them become more confident in interacting with other students (Question 4), The responses were as follows: “Strongly agree” -50%, “Agree”-20%, “Somewhat agree”-25%, and Disagree-5%

As you can see from the above percentages, 50% of the students strongly felt that their confidence in social interaction improved when learning in groups. With a vast majority of students feeling that their social interaction skills had improved, this may suggest again that students gain increased motivation and self-esteem when given a chance to learn in groups as opposed to learning alone.

When students were asked whether or not doing group work in class made them become more confident in saying their opinion (Questions 5), The students who answered Strongly agree/Agree/Somewhat agree totaled 63 %, whereas there was a significant 37 % who answered “Disagree”. Some students further commented on reasons why they responded with “Disagree” with the following: I’m too shy; It’s too difficult to say my opinion; I don’t think that I’m smart enough; I don’t have anything interesting to say; I’m worried how other students will think of me; I’m too scared to speak in front of others. These reasons may suggest that Japanese students lack self-confidence in not only communicating in L2, but not knowing how to take risks in language learning and expressing one’s opinion in front of their peers.

When asked whether or not group work taught them skills such as paraphrasing/summarizing information, problem solving and critical thinking (Question 6), 54% of students answered with either “Strongly agree/Agree/Somewhat agree”. The latter 46% answered with “Disagree”. These responses may suggest that the teacher needs to formulate better strategic methods in instructing the students to acquiring these skills.

When asked whether or not group work in class made them more confident in communicate in English in particular (Question 7) the majority of students (70%) answered with “Agree”. It was encouraging to know that the students felt that their communicative competence improved through group work during the course.

3 Conclusion

Based on the results of the student questionnaire, it seems obvious that the majority of Japanese students who may have originally come from a teacher-centered, individualistic learning environment now seem to prefer to learn student-centered, cooperative learning classroom environment. However, cooperative learning might not be beneficial to all types of learners; some learners prefer and may excel in individualistic learning, where they do not have to be accountable for another person's learning, and therefore results of a group achievement would not jeopardize one's personal grade. However, with an increased demand by both teachers and students in Japan to change the style of learning in the classroom, and in order to prepare students with the skills needed for future jobs that have yet to exist, educators in Japan must encourage their educational institutions to develop curriculums where learner autonomy is strongly encouraged in the classroom. One way to achieve this is to create more opportunities where students can learn together with, and from one another in the classroom.

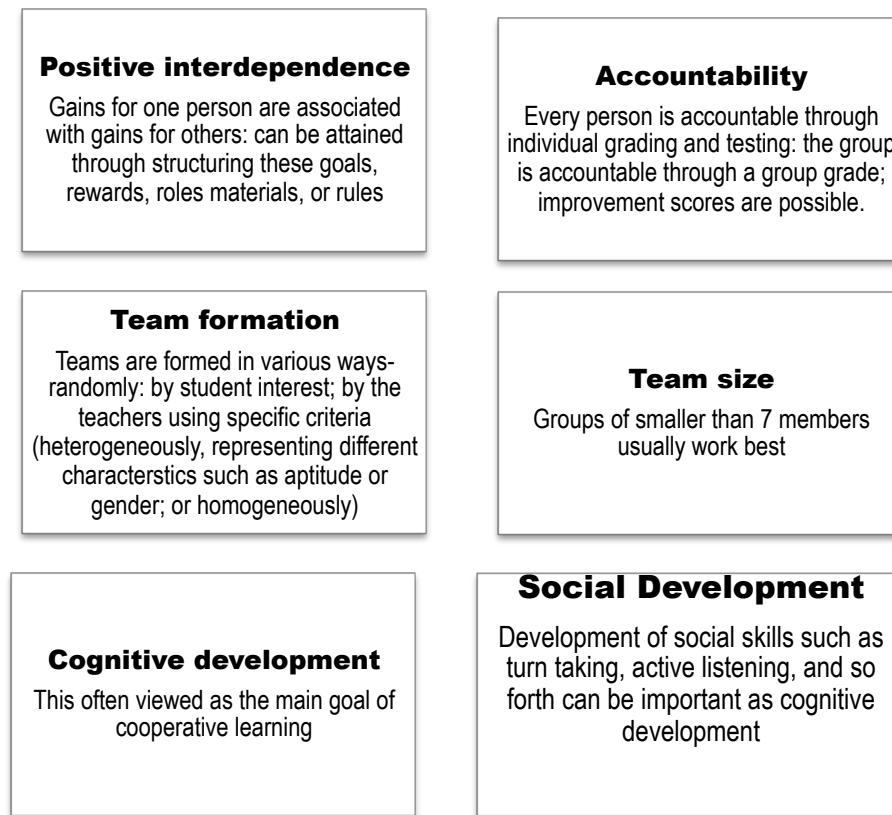
Some suggestions in promoting cooperative learning in the classroom include the following:

- Select groups between three to four people.
 - Assign particular students to groups (male/female ratio, ability level)
 - Have designated, rotating roles for each member to play, such as secretary, facilitator, reporter, etc. Oxford (1997) suggests to assign a role to each student in the group, which as a result can improve self-esteem for low-status learners, and positive interdependence is enhanced by having a group goal to which each person must contribute (p.445).
 - Arrange the classroom accordingly. Group members need to be close together and facing each other (so that they can share materials and converse with each other and exchange ideas and materials) and to make sure the teacher can see and be able to have clear access to all the groups)
 - Clearly explain the task and cooperative goal structure to the students
 - Monitor the groups as they work-the teacher need to monitor carefully how well the groups are functioning: determine what skills are lacking, both related to the subject matter and to the interaction; set up a way for the groups to process how well they functioned and discuss how to do even better, and intervene where problems are serious to help groups work out their own problems. It is probably that some specific instruction will need to be focused on interpersonal skills as students will not have necessarily learned how to work with others effectively (Johnson & Johnson, 1988:37).
 - Encourage individual accountability are: use tasks and topics that are motivating enough so that all group members will want to participate and learn.
 - Start individual assessments after students have had time to collaborate. Call upon group members at random to give their groups answer and to explain it. Each group member takes responsibility for one part or aspect of the groups work.
- It should be noted that cooperative learning is not an easy method to implement in the EFL university classroom in Japan. For teachers who are just beginning to experiment with this approach, it may be wise to start slowly using a variety of cooperative learning techniques. For students who are used to individual learning, it might take some time for them to adjust to this type of collaborative learning in the classroom.

A cooperative learning classroom that promotes autonomous learning is essential to develop Japanese students' both communicative and collaborative abilities, two skills that will help them to thrive and take responsibility anywhere in the world.

Appendix 1

Oxford's Principles of Cooperative Learning (Oxford 1997, pp.445)



1. Positive interdependence: Gains for one person are associated with gains for others: can be attained through structuring these goals, rewards, roles materials, or rules
2. Accountability: Every person is accountable through individual grading and testing; the group is accountable through a group grade; improvement scores are possible.
3. Team formation: Teams are formed in various ways-randomly: by student interest; by the teachers using specific criteria (heterogeneously, representing different characteristics such as aptitude or gender; or homogeneously)
4. Team size: Groups of smaller than 7 members usually work best
5. Cognitive development: This often viewed as the main goal of cooperative learning
6. Social development: Development of social skills such as turn taking, active listening and so forth can be as important as cognitive development

Appendix 2

Classroom Group work Survey

This semester in our English class, we did group work. You worked together with 3 or 4 other students and did activities in discussing, summarizing and presenting your opinions about different topics. Did you like doing group work in class? Why or why not? Please answer the following survey and write down your opinions.

Thank you very much for your cooperation,

Ms. Saki

Check a circle for each question.

⊖ I liked doing group work in class.

- Strongly agree → go to Question 3
- Agree → go to Question 3
- Somewhat agree → go to Question 3
- Disagree → go to Question 2

⊖ I didn't like group work because: (you may check more than one answer)

- it was difficult to speak English
- I don't like to talk to people that I don't know well
- I cannot say my opinion / I am too shy to say my opinion
- I like to work alone more in class

⊗ I like group work because: (you may check more than one answer)

- I could speak freely and say my opinion
- It was fun talking together with other people
- I was interested in hearing other's opinions
- I liked working in groups better than working alone in class

④ Doing group work in class made me become more confident in interacting with other students

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Disagree

⑤ Doing group work in class made me become more confident in saying my opinion

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Disagree

⑥ Doing group work in class taught me how to summarize information

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Disagree

⑦ Doing group work in class made me more confident in communicating in English

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Disagree

⑧ When you did group work, what were some problems? (you may check more than one answer)

- Some group members didn't say their opinions
- Some group members didn't participate (sleeping, used phone, etc.. during class)
- Other: _____
- I didn't think group work was difficult

⑨ When you had a problem (didn't understand what to do, could not communicate, had difficulty doing the activity) what did you do?

- I asked the group leader to help me
- I asked the teacher to help me
- I asked other students in my group to help me
- I didn't do anything

⑩ When your group had a problem (didn't understand what to do, could not communicate, had difficulty doing the activity, what did you do?)

- We asked the teacher to help us
- We tried to solve the problem by ourselves in our group
- We asked other groups for help
- We didn't do anything

Other comments:

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