

*A Metacognitive Process of Collaborative Engagement With Peers in  
Project-Based Language Learning*

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The European Conference on Language Learning 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

In an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment, many students only get to learn or use English in the classroom. To give those students more authentic experiences in language use, some university courses are adopting hands-on learning approaches such as project-based language learning (PBL). One of the biggest benefits of PBL is the role of social interaction as students work together in a situated activity to construct shared understanding through sharing, using, and debating ideas with peers. While this learning approach can enhance students' language learning through joint collaborative efforts, it can cause a variety of challenges in the process as they try to engage with their peers through their L2. This paper reports on the metacognitive process of Japanese university students of intermediate to advanced proficiency in English in their attempts to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers during a group project about current international affairs. The interview data collected from the students after the project were analyzed using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA). The results suggest that students constantly struggled to say something convincing and pleasing to peers so as not to disturb the peaceful atmosphere within the group. It was also found that while students were faced with various internal obstacles arising from multiple emotions, they tried hard to maintain good relationships with their peers. They sometimes spoke in Japanese when doing so would facilitate their collaborative dialogue.

Keywords: Metacognition, Project-Based Language Learning (Pbl), Collaborative Dialogue, Peer Interaction, Cooperative Learning

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## Introduction

There have been substantial changes in recent years in Japanese English education from the traditional teacher-centered grammar-focused approach to a more student-centered approach to foster students' practical communication skills in English. Because of that, some university courses have adopted more hands-on approaches such as task-based-language teaching (TBLT) and project-based language learning (PBLT).

In TBLT, students engage in interactive activities with peers using focused grammatical forms (Doughty & Long, 2003). Through this process, students are expected to gain linguistic knowledge and abilities to use such knowledge in a meaningful context because they can focus their attention on various kinds of language use (Mackey & Polio, 2009). However, some researchers argue that the centrality of a task-based approach may make language learning too functional and by implication limit the range of language used by students (Ellis, 2003). In addition, Task-based teaching approaches may resemble the p-p-p approach in that they may be teaching specific grammatical forms in the formalized context (Tomlinson, 2015).

In PBLT, on the other hand, students usually work on a project that compels them to integrate different language skills as they try to work through several activities (Desiatova, 2008). The origin of PBLT goes back to American Philosopher John Dewey (1938), who says that education and learning are social and interactive processes. According to Dewey, learning occurs when students themselves proactively try to find meaning in the context through autonomous inquiries (1938). Hiroishi (2006) expands on this idea by saying that PBLT provides students the opportunity to engage in collaborative dialogue through which they can exceed their current abilities to accomplish a result that otherwise would not have been possible. This is because when students are engaged in collaborative dialogue, one or more speakers are expected to gain a new or deeper understanding of a certain topic through their interactions (Swain & Watanabe, 2013).

However, PBLT usually requires students to work on multiple tasks on a given topic using their target language and at the same time, collaborate with their peers to accomplish their goals. On top of that, when students work together in a group, many individual factors such as their preexisting knowledge of their topic, personal interests and beliefs, English proficiency, and even their personalities, can affect the way they interact with their peers within a group. Consequently, some groups may encounter more difficulties engaging in collaborative dialogue than others. Thus, it is worthwhile to examine how some groups successfully work toward collaboration while others fail in their collaborative efforts.

In my previous research (Gomez, 2021), I delved into the question of how students failed to engage in collaborative dialogue during a group project in a content-based English language classroom at a Japanese university. The research findings indicated that students failed to engage in collaborative dialogue mainly because they felt it difficult to simultaneously manage the contents and the process of the project using their L2 (target language), and as a result, students' motivation for collaborative engagement was negatively affected (p. 31). However, in the process of analyzing the data through M-GTA, I noticed that the data also reflected students' collaborative engagement. Therefore, this study aims to expand on my previous interpretation of the research (Gomez, 2021) focusing on the metacognitive process of how Japanese university students engage in collaborative dialogue during a group project.

## **Theoretical Background**

PBLL is believed to foster deep learning because students use the target language to acquire linguistic knowledge and other language skills while learning the subject content (Beckett, 1999). One of the main benefits of PBLL is that project work provides language learners with opportunities to recycle their pre-existing language knowledge and skills in a relatively natural context rather than in an orchestrated setting (Haines, 1989). When language learners take on complex cognitive processing using the target language to formulate knowledge and thoughts, they are engaged in languaging (Swain, et al., 2013). Language learners are expected to enhance their current knowledge and further acquire new knowledge through collaborative efforts for languaging with peers, which is called collaborative dialogue (Swain & Watanabe, 2013).

Previous research suggests that collaborative dialogue helps language learners gain fluency in the target language because more negotiations occur when learners feel more comfortable using the language with their peers (Sato & Lyster, 2007). Through collaborative dialogue, learners can also develop their linguistic knowledge as they work together to co-construct the meaning behind the linguistic rules (Swain, 2000). This is because they are often compelled to use the target language in their communication with their peers (Swain & Suzuki, 2008). While many language education professionals have conducted research on collaborative dialogue in foreign and second language contexts, many of them mainly focused on individual task-based activities such as grammar or vocabulary learning (Swain, 2009) or essay writing (Watanabe & Swain, 2008). In contrast to these skill-focused contexts where students are usually given the task by the teacher, PBLL often forces students to come up with the tasks themselves and take charge of the group process to accomplish their goals. This inevitably compels the students to deal with more challenges in the process of their learning.

Gomez (2021) investigated how Japanese university students dealt with these challenges during their group project by focusing on their metacognitive process that led to their failure in collaborative dialogue. The results indicated that one major factor that led to a failure to engage in collaborative dialogue was that students were torn between the target language and the contents of the project topic, and as a result, they ended up feeling demotivated to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers (p.39). However, the results also indicated that students tried to make collaborative efforts, struggling to figure out how to accommodate themselves in a given situation (p.41). Expanding on these findings, this study will focus on the metacognitive process of how Japanese university students of intermediate to advanced proficiency engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers in a content-based group project in an English language course. The revelations in this study will give language educators further insights into EFL learners' metacognition related to collaborative dialogue during a group project.

## **Method**

### **1. Target Population and Course Background**

This study involves 12 students from a private university in Tokyo who were in an elective English course on current issues. The course, taught by the author, was aimed at fostering students' four skills at the advanced level of English proficiency by comprehensively using the four skills in English.

The 14-week course was offered in 2018 and each lesson lasted for 90 minutes. In the first week, students got to know each other through an ice-breaking activity. From Week 2 to Week 9, students engaged in group and class discussions after watching or reading authentic materials that addressed a variety of social issues related to culture, society, economy, politics, international relations, and science and technology. Every other week, students were instructed to lead a group discussion in turn on an assigned topic based on the discussion questions they prepared as homework. Groups were randomly formed every time to get themselves acquainted with different classmates. From Week 10 to Week 13, students worked on a project in groups of four. On Week 14, each group presented the results of their project for about 15 minutes. English was used as the main language of instruction throughout the course and students were instructed to use English to engage in all discussions, including the project.

The course involved 16 enrolled students between the second and the fourth year in university with mixed majors. Among them, 12 students agreed to participate in the study. The level of English proficiency of the participants was intermediate to advanced levels, ranging from 710 to 965 in the TOEIC reading and listening test conducted by Education Testing Service Global (ETS). A person with a score of around 730 is believed to be capable of handling any situation in English though there may be individual differences (ETS, 2012). The participants' language proficiency background is described below (Table 1).

Students	Sex	Year in School	TOEIC Score	Overseas Experience (Country) / Duration	Major of Study at University
S1	M	2 <sup>nd</sup>	730	None	Social Studies
S2	M	3 <sup>rd</sup>	850	U.S.A. / 4 months	Intercultural Communication
S3	M	3 <sup>rd</sup>	710	England, New Zealand / 6 months respectively	Intercultural Communication
S4	M	2 <sup>nd</sup>	850	The Philippines / 2 months	Global Business
S5	M	2 <sup>nd</sup>	785	Australia / 2 weeks	Business
S6	M	2 <sup>nd</sup>	755	Canada / 2 weeks	Politics
S7	F	2 <sup>nd</sup>	925	U.S.A. / 2 years	Global Business
S8	F	4 <sup>th</sup>	965	Jordan, Bhutan / 3 years in total	Math
S9	F	2 <sup>nd</sup>	740	U.S.A., UK, Russia / 1 month respectively	Modern Culture
S10	F	2 <sup>nd</sup>	810	U.S.A. / 3 weeks	English Literature
S11	F	2 <sup>nd</sup>	935	U.S.A. / 1 year, Canada / 2 weeks	Intercultural Communication
S12	F	3 <sup>rd</sup>	730	Canada / 1 month	English Literature

**Table 1. Profiles of the Participants** (Gomez, 2021)

## 2. Description of the Project

The project was designed using Mergendoller's High-Quality PBL Framework (HQPBL) (2018), which comprised six elements essential for a high-quality project. The framework

includes 1) intellectual challenge and accomplishment, 2) authenticity, 3) public product, 4) project management, 5) collaboration, and 6) reflection (Mergendoller, 2018).

The project titled “How Can We Make a Difference in the World?” was aimed at giving the students the initiative to synthesize the information and knowledge practiced and acquired in the earlier weeks. During the four-week project, students collaboratively worked to 1) suggest a current issue on the international level, 2) research the background of the chosen issue both from the Japanese and the global perspectives, and 3) present their opinion as a group on how to deal with the issue to change the current situation for the better.

In the first week of the project, students worked on the project planning in groups of four. Those who shared similar interests were put together. No other elements such as language proficiency, major of study, sex, etc. were considered in the group formation. Students then spent three weeks working on their project in and out of the classroom. After the four-week-long project, each group gave a presentation to report their results. In the first week of the project, the teacher told the students to use the target language of English in their communication with their peers during the classroom discussions. Teacher intervention was limited to occasions when the teacher noticed that the students were struggling with the task itself, had questions about their topic of choice, and were speaking in Japanese for a long time in their discussion.

### **3. Data Collection**

The data used for this paper are interview narratives with 12 students. The participants agreed to participate in this study after they were given an explanation of their rights and the purpose of this study. The interviews were conducted by the author in Japanese, the native language of both the author and the participants, to prevent misunderstanding. The semi-structured interviews were conducted three to four months after the termination of the course. Self-reflective journal entries about the project written by the participants were shared with them during the interviews to help refresh their memories. Each interview was conducted for about 60 minutes in a private area on the university campus.

The main purpose of the study is to elucidate students’ awareness of their interactions with their peers and how such perceptions affected the ways they behaved during the project. The interviewer used the following guiding questions to elicit the participants’ narratives: 1) How do you think you contributed to the group project? Did you try to do anything specifically to make yourself useful to the group? 2) Did other members contribute to the group project? Please describe how each member contributed. 3) Were there any moments when you felt uncomfortable during the project? If so, what made you feel that way? Did you do anything about it? 4) Did you ever feel concerned about anything during the project? If so, did you verbalize your concerns to your peers? If not, how did you deal with the concerns? Since the interviews were conducted in an exploratory manner, further questions were asked to elicit more detailed narratives from the participants. After the interviews, the participants were given a small amount of money for their cooperation. All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

### **4. Instruments**

The interview data were analyzed qualitatively using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA), which was developed by Kinoshita (2003, 2007) adopting and

modifying the original Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analytical tool is ideal for this study because it has three distinct strengths over GTAs. The first strength of M-GTA is that it enables the researcher to describe a process of human interactions and conceptualize a model to illustrate a process in a similar context. The second strength is that it allows the researcher to interpret the interview data as it happens. This is different from the other GTAs (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), in which the data are fragmented during the analysis. Kinoshita says it is difficult to merely use logic when interpreting the meaning of the fragmented data (2007). Furthermore, the analytical theme and the researcher's perspective are at the center of the focus when analyzing the data in M-GTA, thus this tool allows the researcher to explicate the process more faithfully to reality (Kinoshita, 2007). The last strength of M-GTA is that it advocates the utilization of the results to better serve the human service sectors for more analysis. Thus, educators in Japan would be able to utilize the conceptual model developed from this study when they incorporate PBL into their foreign language classrooms.

The M-GTA analysis (Kinoshita, 2003, 2007) takes the following procedure:

- 1) The researcher starts the analysis by determining the analytical theme and the analytically focused person. The analytically focused person represents a similar group of participants.
- 2) Then, concepts are generated using analytical worksheets. A separate worksheet is used to write the concept name, the definition for the concept, variations extracted from the interview data, and theoretical memos. While interpreting the data, the researcher writes down random thoughts as theoretical memos.
- 3) The concepts are then factored into categories that consolidate the ideas representing the concepts.
- 4) The data are constantly compared on multiple levels of variations, concepts, and categories until the ideas are saturated.
- 5) A conceptual model is shown as a figure to indicate the overall result of the analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this study, the analysis resulted in 50 concepts (appear in <>) and 14 categories (appear in [ ]). Each category is comprised of concepts that define the category they belong to. The analytical theme was set as a metacognitive process of engagement in a collaborative dialogue by Japanese university students during a group project. The analytically focused people were Japanese university students of intermediate to higher levels of proficiency working on a group project in an EFL classroom. The model in Appendix 1. shows a process that can be observed in any given setting where a group of Japanese university students of a similar language proficiency level work together in a content-based group project. The categories will now be described to show how the researcher interpreted the participants' metacognitive thoughts under the analytical theme.

### **1. Striving to Maintain a Good Atmosphere Within the Group**

#### ***1.1 Won't Object but I'm Not Convinced***

When students are not yet quite sure who their peers are, they <can't be frank with peers because they don't know how to relate to them>. Students also feel reluctant to speak of their opinions when their peers seem to have a lot more knowledge about the subject they are working on because they feel they are not capable enough of discussing the subject. Some

even feel it's <hard to object to peers' opinions due to gaps in content knowledge>. It may appear that the discussion may be going well without any problems when nobody objects to anybody. Students do [not contest but they are not necessarily convinced] by their peers' opinions.

### ***1.2 Compromise May Be Necessary Sometimes***

While students have some kinds of inner conflicts of their own, many of them try to relate to their peers collaboratively. In a group project, students start with a driving question, make decisions after a series of discussions with peers, formulate tasks to be completed, set up and manage a project schedule, and work together to complete the tasks. Throughout the process, students encounter multiple occasions when they must exchange opinions with their peers. There are times when students realize that their peers' opinions are very different from their own. When faced with these situations, students tell themselves <it's OK to have a different opinion> because they want to maintain good relationships with their peers and continue working together. But at the same time, they have a feeling of resignation knowing that they have not fully deepened the discussion yet but <can't do more because time is limited>. Hence, they convince themselves that they [need to compromise sometimes].

### ***1.3 Will Just Go With the Flow***

There is a strong sense of willingness to maintain good relationships with their peers among the students. One good example can be seen when students <adjust their level and speed accordingly to fit their peers' level and speed>. Unlike an individual project, a group project requires students to work collaboratively. That means helping each other, respecting differences, and getting the best out of each member to create a result that would not have been possible alone. The Japanese students sensibly feel the differences in their abilities and individual characteristics, and adjust the way they behave within the group. They also <get influenced by peers' actions and words> in the process of group work, and learn to adjust their behaviors to fit evolving situations within the group. In addition, students are unconsciously aware that being too distinct from others would disrupt the harmony within the group. Thus, they susceptibly observe peers' abilities, vibes, motivation level, etc., and <make efforts just as much as peers>. They [will just go with the flow] to maintain a good atmosphere within the group so that they can work collaboratively with their peers.

### ***1.4 How Can I Convince Everyone and Make Them Happy?***

No group can be completely homogenous even if the teacher intends to formulate groups to make it so. Students sensibly observe different qualities in their peers. They feel that some peers are more proficient than others in certain areas and sometimes <feel inferior to peers> or <feel bad because they are not as capable as their peers>. Contrarily, when students feel that they are more proficient than others, they try not to show off their skills or make their abilities noticeable to peers because they just <don't want to be dominating so keep a low profile>. Students are also very sensitive to how their words and deeds can affect the group atmosphere. Even when they disagree with their peers' opinions, they <won't object to peers' opinions so as not to spoil the atmosphere>. To maintain a good atmosphere, they <have to say something to convince everyone>. Hence, students are constantly asking themselves [how can I convince everyone and make them happy?]

## **2. Feeling of Psychological Distance**

### ***2.1 Get a Bit Annoyed by Peers' Actions and Words***

When peers' words and deeds were different from what students expected, they [get a bit annoyed by what they do]. It is sometimes irritating for students to see that peers <won't object to others' opinions so as not to spoil the atmosphere> (1.4). When this happens, students <hope that peers keep trying until they get convinced>. At other times, students regret that they had systematically divided responsibilities among each member. They <wish they didn't divide roles so much> because that led to less communication within the group. Furthermore, a group's collaborative work can be greatly affected by the motivation level of each member. Students feel that <everyone must commit to quality work>. They also feel that the group's motivation level can significantly go down if even a single member of the group does not want to collaborate because <negative vibes have more impact> than positive vibes.

### ***2.2 Don't Want to Take an Initiative***

There are multiple times when decisions must be made in group projects. The Japanese students who tend to avoid taking actions that result in standing out within a group [don't want to take an initiative]. Therefore, when important decisions must be made, they <leave the decision up to capable peers>.

### ***2.3 Wish There Was a More Friendly Atmosphere***

When choosing the language of communication within the group, students [just go with the flow] (1.3). They respond in English when peers speak to them in English but switch to Japanese when spoken in Japanese. Thus, students <switch language if that's what peers want>. Even if they want to speak English, <they can't suggest that they speak in English>. As a result, they <can't speak English once someone speaks Japanese>. This is especially distinct in groups where students do not feel emotionally close to one another. Hence, students [wish there was a more friendly atmosphere] so that everyone can speak more frankly.

## **3. Using L1 to Fill Gaps**

### ***3.1 Difficult to Discuss Because My English Isn't Good Enough***

While it depends on the topic of the project, projects that deal with social issues require students to understand and use a certain level of academic English when communicating with peers. Even those whose English proficiency levels are intermediate to advanced, students sometimes feel that they [can't discuss because their English isn't good enough]. They also feel that it is <difficult to speak English because of the level gap> among the group members. Thinking about the real-world current issues in their foreign language can be cognitively demanding and students feel that they <can't keep up with their peers' speed of thinking>. This would cause them to <give up speaking English along the way> and <use Japanese to better understand each other>.



### ***3.2 Awkward to Speak English With Japanese Peers***

Students sometimes give up English use because of cognitive reasons. However, they also switch their language due to socio-psychological reasons. Since all the students speak the same L1 in an EFL environment such as Japan, they feel [awkward speaking English with Japanese peers]. While students work on the project about authentic real-world topics, this is still an orchestrated situation, which is not, in fact, an authentic setting. Students may feel uncomfortable having to speak a foreign language of English with their Japanese peers in this rather unrealistic context. The other reason is that students feel a little embarrassed speaking English with their Japanese peers. Students intuitively sense that Japanese and English are very different both linguistically and culturally. Therefore, when speaking English, students feel that they <become a different person when they speak English>. Thus, they use Japanese to hide their feeling of awkwardness and embarrassment.

### ***3.3 Do We Need to Use English Only?***

For foreign language learners, working on a project can be very demanding and they could face linguistic, sociocultural, and psychological challenges. Students feel it's <hard if only English is spoken>. While language use is an important focus in PBL, gaining knowledge in the target subject is also an essential part of their learning goal in PBL. Thus, it is understandable if students have a question, <is learning English the main goal?> If learning English is not the sole purpose of the project, students wonder [do we need to use English only?] and start thinking that <Japanese can be used depending on the purpose>.

### ***3.4 Speak Japanese so You Can Trust Me***

Since English is not their native language, miscommunication can occur depending on the proficiency of the speakers and the complexities of the content of the communication. For that reason, students feel that they <can't tell what their peers really feel when English is spoken> and assume that <Japanese is better for communicating true feelings>. Students also <speaking Japanese to express politeness>, which they find hard to do in English, in order to build a closer relationship with peers. Moreover, students sometimes <speaking Japanese to camouflage their English abilities>. This is a way to reach out to students who appear to have a lower English proficiency level. Proficient speakers feel that speaking English can seem threatening to less proficient speakers, thus it is a way for them to communicate to them that they [speak Japanese so you can trust me]. In this manner, students try to fill not only linguistic gaps but also psychological gaps with their peers to engage in collaborative dialogue.

## **4. Positive Attitude Can Help**

### ***Want to Speak English***

Students sometimes use Japanese to reach out and engage with their peers. But at the same time, they [want to speak English] and work collaboratively with their peers using English. While there are times when students [just go with the flow] (1.3), they also feel that they <won't go with the flow because they want to speak English>. It is difficult to speak English when everyone starts speaking Japanese especially if <they can't suggest that everyone speak in English> (2.3). However, students say they <will speak English if someone forces them>.

Thus, outside assistance may be needed when students cannot resolve challenges like this by themselves.

## **5. Reaching Out to Collaborate**

### ***5.1 If Only Someone Helps***

Despite the difficulties they face, students are struggling to find ways to keep up their motivation to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers. Ironically, their attempts to maintain a good atmosphere within the group is working as an obstacle to their communication. One good example of that is their use of Japanese despite their desire to use English when communicating with each other. However, [if only someone helps], students would be able to overcome such difficulties. When they need to make important decisions during the discussions, <a neutral third party can help prevent confrontations> so that they can maintain a good atmosphere while engaging in a collaborative dialogue with peers. Furthermore, students also believe that things would become easier sometimes if peers come to their support. Those who <feel inferior to peers> (1.4) <can speak if helped by a capable peer> and <can keep on trying if being recognized> by their peers. When students <feel bad because they are not as capable as their peers> (1.4), they wish their peers would help. When peers try to reach out and give support, they <feel thankful for trying to give their support>.

### ***5.2 Try to Reach Out and Collaborate***

Students manage to engage in collaborative dialogue when they [try to reach out and collaborate]. Collaborative dialogue often occurs when students <work proactively to play their part> and <discuss to decide on responsibilities> so that they all can relate to each other collaboratively. Students sometimes <take up a facilitating role> so that the discussion can go smoothly. They even <get together outside the classroom to work collaboratively>. In essence, the willingness to collaborate and conscientious efforts to <reach out to others> are crucial factors for collaborative dialogue to occur.

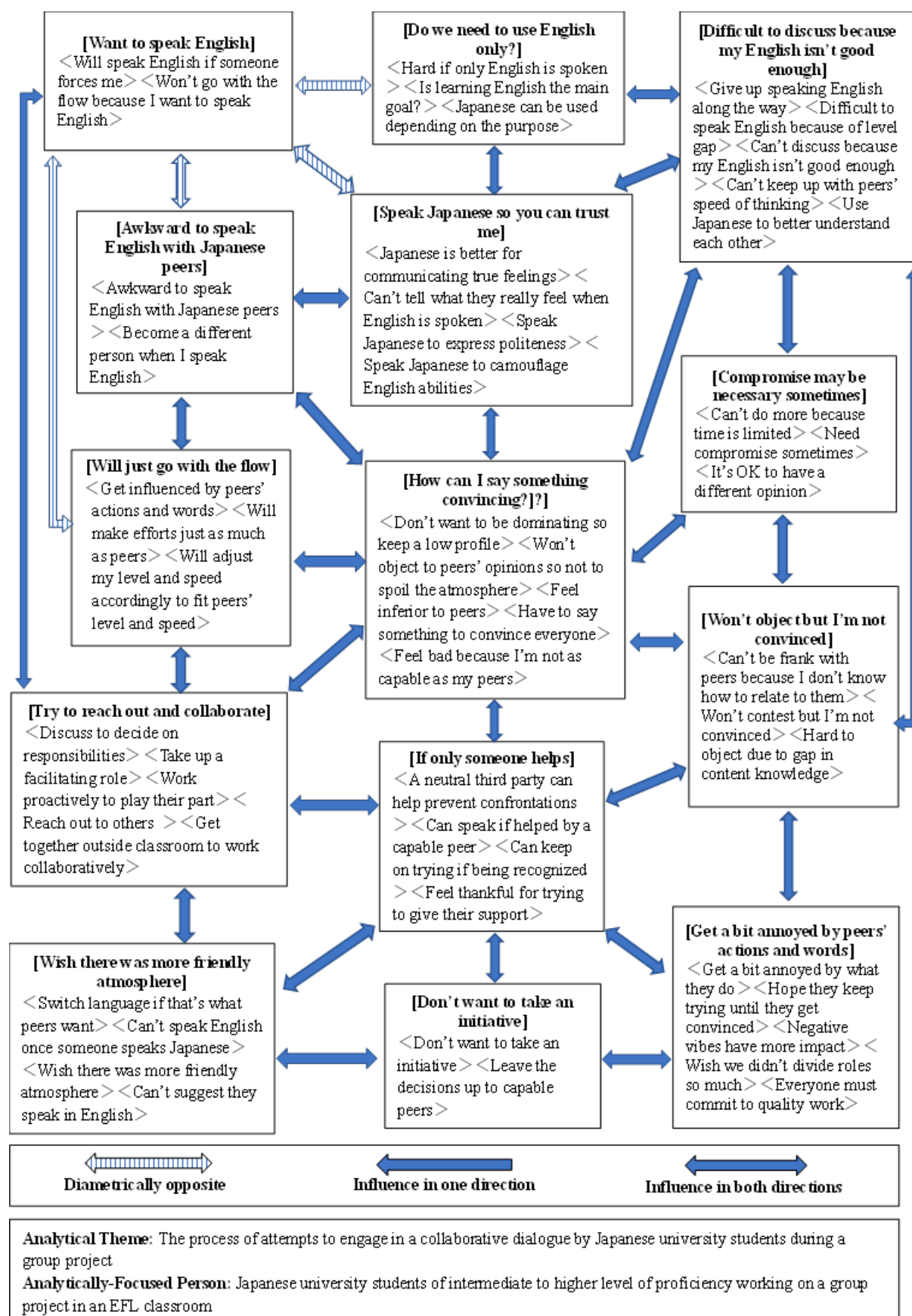
## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the data reveal that students constantly struggle to say something convincing and pleasing to peers so as not to disturb the peaceful atmosphere within the group. Students are faced with various internal obstacles arising from multiple emotions such as the feeling of uncertainty about their relationship with each other, the emotional distance they feel towards their peers due to differences in age and the faculty they belong to, and feeling of inadequacy due to gaps in English proficiency and content knowledge. Nevertheless, they try hard to maintain good relationships with their peers to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers. It was also revealed that students try to proactively reach out to peers in and outside the classroom to collaborate to fill the gaps in language proficiency and content knowledge. In addition, students feel uncomfortable speaking in English with their Japanese peers, and speak in Japanese when they decide that doing so would facilitate their collaborative dialogue. What this study adds to the previous study (Gomez, 2021) is that while students feel multiple emotional obstacles preventing them from collaboratively engaging with their peers, their desire to maintain a good relationship with each other compels them to say something convincing and pleasing to reach out to their peers. Such efforts work to help a collaborative dialogue take place.

The findings of this study have some pedagogical implications as well. Students feel that the collaborative and supportive attitude of capable peers as well as the assistance from a neutral third party would help them overcome some of their emotional barriers to engage in collaborative dialogue with their peers.

The current findings as well as those in Gomez (2021) can provide useful insights to foreign language teachers when they incorporate projects in their classrooms. Further studies are needed to find out if more cognitive activities occur when students engage in collaborative dialogue using their L1 rather than their L2. It is also worthwhile to examine if collaborative dialogue would help students' better performance as a group.

## Appendix A



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