

# Students' perception of group work in EFL class

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the students' perception of group-work activity in their English classes and discover factors which contribute to their successful language learning. The participants are four college students who study at a technical college in Japan, and all of them are majoring in engineering. The participants engaged in a group activity in which they read the passage in the textbook and give a presentation about the story, following a structure directed by the teacher. The videotaped classroom observation and semi-structured face-to-face interviews revealed that several advantages such as promoting cooperative attitudes, reducing individual workload, encouraging low level students to participate in the activity, and some factors teachers should consider for successful group work activity, such as physical layout of the class, task types, and composition of group members.

## 1. Introduction

Cooperative learning has become a common practice in both EFL and ESL classes. This teaching approach is believed to provide a more motivating and supportive learning environment than individual work. Since I started my career as an EFL instructor in Japan, I have adopted cooperative learning, especially small group activities in my classes because I have believed group work facilitates students' learning and helps the language class become more motivating for students. Based on my teaching experience, I believe group work activity can help students to enjoy language classes and learn more than individual activities. However, as I did not have clear evidence of the advantages, I decided to conduct a qualitative research to investigate students' perception on group work.

There are not many researches looking at students' perception on group work, however Fushino's (2006) quantitative study shows that Japanese college students viewed group work as a valuable way to improve their English. Thus, the goal of this study is to investigate students' perception of group-work activity in their English classes, and the factors which contribute to their successful language learning. To achieve this goal, I set the following research questions:

- 1) What problem do students have in doing group activity?
- 2) What advantages do students feel in doing the task?
- 3) What factors contribute to the successful learning?

## 2. Literature review

Some research indicates that students can achieve better results and are more satisfied with their learning experiences in group work than individual work (Gross 1993; Springer, Stanne & Donovan 1999). Compared with individual work, group work typically results in greater efforts to achieve, for example more positive relationships among students (Cooper, Johnson, Johnson & Wilderson 1980). Gomleksiz' (2007) study shows that cooperative learning experience had a significant positive effect on engineering students' attitudes towards learning English and promoted better interactions among students as well.

On the other hand, Li and Campbell's (2008) study dealing with Asian students in New Zealand revealed not only the strength of group work, but also some detrimental factors that affects group dynamics, such as members' attitudes and willingness to cooperate and contribute as a team, the composition of the group, students' competing demands on students' time and

attention, heterogeneity from the natural abilities of students, and varying cultural values and beliefs held by group members.

Kagan (1992) argues five basic principles that facilitate group work: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction and group processing. Kagan emphasizes positive interdependence as being at the heart of cooperative learning. A commitment to success as each person's efforts gives benefits to the whole group. The second principle, individual accountability refers to each member being regarded as important and must be accountable for contributing his or her share of work. Third, equal participation means that all group members should actively participate in the group work. The fourth principle is simultaneous interaction, which is face-to-face interaction and the promotion of each member's successful learning to encourage for sharing resources and helping and praising each other's efforts to learn. Lastly, Kagan argues for the importance of group processing, which suggests that students should be taught communication skills, effective leadership, decision-making skills, trust-building, and conflict-management skills so that they can discuss and monitor each members' performance and behaviors.

While a number of studies have been conducted to examine the effects of cooperative learning, Chen and Hird's (2006) study indicates the difficulty of generalizing about what happens when students get into groups in English lessons, and argues that there are still many unexplored aspects regarding how group work functions and what students actually do in groups in English classrooms.

### 3. Methodology

#### The context

The context of this study is an English class of a technical college in Japan. This technical college is called "KOSEN" in Japanese. Kosen is a national college funded by the national government and every prefecture has at least one kosen. Kosen was established in 1961, in response to a strong demand from the industrial sector to foster engineers to help sustain the high Japanese economic growth at that

time. Kosen offers five years of consistent engineering education from 15 years old, which combines high school and junior college education. All the students who learn at Kosen major in engineering and the majority of the students are male students. When students complete the five-year program, they receive an associate degree of engineering. Some Kosen offer more advanced two-year program for the students who finished the five year program. After the completion of the advanced program, students receive a bachelor degree in engineering.

The target English class was "English II", which was a required course for second year students at this school. This class meets twice a week and each session lasts ninety minutes. The main goal of the course was to improve students' English reading and grammar skills. In this course, the students engage in various activities based on a textbook which is authorized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). The class consists of 40 students, including 38 male students and 2 female students.

#### The participants

The participants of this study are four second year students of the Kosen. They have had English education for five years since they were junior high school students.

In the observed lesson, students formed a group of four. As there were 40 students in this target class, there were 10 groups in this class in total. Out of 10 groups, I chose one target group as the focus group. The choice of the target group was considered as something between convenience sampling and maximum variation. The target group consisted of 2 male students and 2 female students. I chose this group because I thought it would be better if the group was gender-mixed, and also the group included both active and less active students.

In this report, one of the male students is referred to as Y, the other male student is referred to as K, one of the female students is referred to as O, and the other female student is referred to as M. As I have taught these four students before, I was very familiar with these students' characteristics. First, Student Y was a very active and smart student. His English skills were the highest in this class, and his reading and

grammar skills were high intermediate. He had good communication skills not only with his classmates but also teachers and had many friends in this class. The other male student, Student K, was also a very active and a diligent student. His English skills were also higher in this class, and his reading and grammar skills were intermediate level. He did not talk as much as Y but he also had many friends in this class. Student Y and K were close friends. Student O was a female student and a relatively quiet student. She did not talk in class but she seemed to have close friends in other classes. She always did her homework and her English skills were low intermediate. The other female student, Student M, was a very quiet student and I had never seen her talk with her classmates in class. Her English skills were very low and she seemed to be struggling in English classes. Although there were only two female students in this class, Student O and M do not seem to be close friends.

### The task

The main task of the lesson was to read the passage in the textbook and give a PowerPoint presentation about the story, following a structure provided by the teacher. The passage they read was a 4 page story about storks in Japan, and written in English. The teacher directed that each presentation should include 1) each member's role, 2) the history of stork in Japan, 3) how Toyooka citizens revived storks, 4) what the people did to release the revived storks into the wild, and 5) what each member learned from the story. Students evaluated all the presentations by their classmates by filling out an evaluation form designed by the teacher. Two sessions were spent for preparation and the third session was spent for in-class presentation and evaluation.

### Data collection methods

Videotaped classroom observations and semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted in order to obtain the data. For the classroom observation, the video camera was set so that it could record all the group members' face and movements. All of these classes took place in a computer room.

For the interviews, the participants consisted of all the students who were the members of the target

group the researcher observed. After the classroom observation, four individual interviews were conducted. The four interviews took place in the researcher's office at school. These interviews were conducted one week after the third lesson. The interviewer and the student sat down face to face across the desk to talk about the class in which the student engaged in group work activity. These four interviews were recorded with a recorder, a battery-operated Linear PCM Recorder M10 (SONY) with 4GB embedded memory.

### Methods of analysis

Interpretive analysis was conducted to analyze the data. For the observations, I first wrote field notes including a description of what happened in the class and what I noticed or questioned, based on the video recordings. For the interviews, which were designed based on the classroom observations, the researcher first transcribed all the interviews with the target students. Students' comments were then sorted and analyzed according to the eight interview questions.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### Findings of classroom observation

The video recordings of the classroom observations show that the group seemed to work well. The final product, which was a PowerPoint presentation in class, was highly evaluated by other classmates. All the group members seemed to work hard during the class to prepare the presentation. Although serious problems were not seen in completing the task, the observations and interviews revealed several features of this target group work.

#### *Familiarity with the task*

One of feature that surprised me was that the students quickly divided the task into four parts and to assigned each role only, which took only a few minutes. I anticipated it would usually take longer for students to do this part; the focus students, however, quickly and smoothly finished this process. As the teacher has frequent practice of this type of group work in the class, they are very familiar with this type of activity. The familiarity of the task seems to contribute to the smooth group work.

### *The amount of interaction*

Language teachers generally think that group work activity encourages students to talk more in class. However, for this target group, the amount of interaction among group members was much less than I expected. They worked on the computer most of the time. The less interaction might be attributed to the nature of the task, which was making a PowerPoint presentation. They used a computer to translate and summarize the part of the story they are in charge of and to create the PowerPoint slides. Another reason for the limited amount of interaction may be because they were videotaped.

### *Limited interaction among students*

Student Y, who was a kind of leader of the group, initiated almost all the interaction. He talked to K the most, and also talked to O too, but not as much as K. He also talked to M but it was just twice. There was interaction between Y and K, Y and O, but there seemed no interaction between M and the other students. M seemed really shy and did not talk almost at all in class.

### Design of the interview

Based on the data obtained from the classroom observations which the researcher conducted from the end of January to the beginning of February, the follow-up interviews were designed. The interview was to seek support for the interpretation of the classroom observations and to examine the questions that I came up with when analyzing the classroom observation.

The main purpose of the interview for this study was to examine what each participant felt in the group work activity. The interview questions were designed to investigate how each member of the focus group felt about group work activities, whether they prefer group work activities to individual activities, how they felt about the less active student in the group, what kind of task they prefer when doing group work, what kind of environment makes it easy for them to work in, when they feel difficulty, and what benefits they felt in doing the group work. The following eight questions were asked to investigate the research questions. The wordings and order of each question were modified depending on each student's responses.

1. Did you have any difficulties in doing group work?
2. Did you find any good points in doing group work?
3. Which task do you prefer, making PowerPoint presentations or making presentations with handouts?
4. What types of classroom do you think is easier or more comfortable for you to do group work in?
5. What kind of person is easy for you to work with?
6. What kind of person is difficult for you to work with?
7. What did you feel about the female student (M) who did not talk at all in group work?
8. Which do you prefer, working in group or working individually? Why?

### Findings of interviews

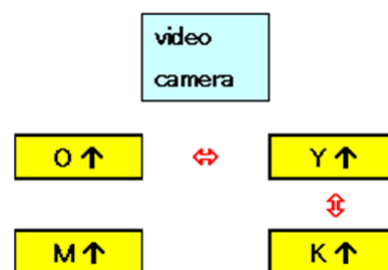
The semi-structured face to face interviews revealed several important factors which lead to successful group work activity. The interviews provided more detailed information about what was going on during the group work.

### *Seating arrangement*

One of the most interesting things found from the interviews is that the seating arrangement significantly affected how they work. Three of the students mentioned that they did not talk very much because of the seating. In the computer room in which the class took place, they sat facing the same way. Figure 1 shows the seating arrangement and the direction of interactions between the students. Therefore, it was difficult for them to talk to each other. K, O and M reported this factor is one of the reasons why they did not interact with very much. For example, M reported as follows:

*M: nantoiuka... ushiro kara koeokakeru toiunoga yarinikui. (well...it's kind of awkward to talk to group members from behind)*

Figure 1. Seating arrangement in the computer room



While the focus class took place in the computer room, other classes in which they make a presentation without using PowerPoint usually take place in a regular classroom. In the regular classroom, they are allowed to move their desks and chairs so that they can see each member's face (See Figure 2). When the interviewer asked K which he likes more, working in a regular classroom or in a computer room, he said:

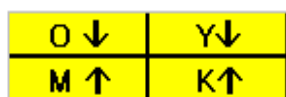
*K: "purinto dake yattara, kyoushitsu no houga yari yasui. Seki ugokashitari surunde, shaberenaï janaidesuka... kyoushitsu yattara, tukue ugokashite, shomen muitetara, kao awashite, zatudan toaka ironna hanashi, dekirukedo..." (When I do a task without using PowerPoint, it is better for me to work in a regular classroom...well...we can move our chairs and desks. In a computer room, all the students sit facing front, so we cannot talk. In the regular classroom, we can talk looking at other students face...)*

M also responded to the same question as follows:

*M: "kyoushitsu de yatteiru houga, otagai dokomade yatteruka susunderuka ga wakarunde." (It is easier for me to see other members' progress when I work in a regular classroom)*

All of the students reported that this type of seating arrangement (See Figure 2) makes them work more effectively as a group because it is easier for them to talk to each other and to see what each member is doing. As the students' comments indicate, physical layout is one of the most important factors for teachers to consider in doing group work.

Figure 2. Seating arrangement in the regular classroom



#### Task Types

The target group students are used to doing group work in their English classes, and regularly engage in two types of tasks; one of which is to make a PowerPoint presentation about the story in the textbook, and the other is to give a presentation

about the story only with handouts. The interview showed that the students seemed to prefer PowerPoint presentation. However, O and M pointed out one of the disadvantages of making a PowerPoint presentation. They reported that because they are not familiar with how to use the software, they need to rely on somebody in the group to make the PowerPoint slides. M reported as follows:

*M: "watashi ga pawaa pointo ga dekinainde, doushitemo, powaa pointo ga dekiruko ni yatte morautte... sonoko niha hutan ga kakaru kana..." (I don't know how to create PowerPoint slides, so I need to ask someone who can do it... I think it becomes a burden on the student...)*

In this target group, both girls seem to have less computer skills. As Van Lier. (2003) pointed out, it is important for language teachers to consider not only students language skills but also their computer skills in doing a task in a computer room.

K, in addition, reported that he thinks PowerPoint tasks are better because PowerPoint task require more individual contribution than the other type of task and cannot cheat as follows:

*K: "maa, kami ni kaku dake yattara, arejanaidesuka, nanka, kekkou utushitari... pawaa pointo tokayattara mae motte yattokanto dekihen kara, souyatte, tema kakete yaruhouga iikana to omoimasu"(If the task is to write a summary of the story on the handout...you know...we can copy other group's handout...but we can't do that in making PowerPoint slides. I think it's better to make something by working hard with members.)*

#### Advantages of group work

All of them seemed to prefer group work to individual work. One of the reasons they provided is that they can help each other. O and Y mentioned this factor as one of the biggest advantages of group work.

*O: yappari wakaranakatta toki oshiete moraeru. (When I can't understand, I can get some help from group members.)*

M reported that she felt her English skills were low and it was much easier for her to work with other classmates when doing a task.

*M: hitori de yaruto, yappari eigo ga motomoto negate nande... (When I working by myself... I mean... I am not good at English...)*

M also mentioned that it is beneficial for her to know that the interpretation of the English reading passage varies from individual to individual.

*M: hitono kangae toka souiunowo kikeru ba ga arutoiunoha sugoku iito omou. (I think it's good for me to know other students' ideas.)*

Supporting M's comments, K pointed out that group work is better especially for less skilled students. If those students are made to work by themselves, they cannot complete the task because of their lack of knowledge or English skills, and they just wait for the answers.

*K: guruupu de sagyou shinaito, yaranai yatu ha zettai yaranai. (Lazy students never do their work unless they need to work with someone.)*

*K: guruupu de yattara, yarana akan huinki ga aru kara (If they work in a group, they feel they have to do something, so they cannot be lazy.)*

In addition, K and Y said that they prefer group work to individual work because the amount of work becomes less. They explained that when they do a task in group, they can divide the task into several parts and assign each part to the member, which makes the amount of work less.

*K: yappa... are janaisu, yappa zenbu yanno shindoishi, minna de wakete yattara, yarutoko sukunaku narukara... (When I do a task by myself, I mean... I feel it's a lot of work to complete the entire task by myself... it become less amount of work if I can work with other students.)*

#### *Disadvantages of group work*

Y pointed out that group work sometimes gives him some kind of pressure because he feels he has to work harder and show better performance otherwise the group work will be ruined, which leads to poor evaluation of all the group members, not only his grades but also other members grades. Students who tend to be a leader of the group, like Y, seem to be inclined to feel this kind of pressure.

Y, K, and O mentioned about members they prefer to work with. They reported that working with someone who does not do his or her assigned job makes it difficult or uncomfortable for them to work in a group. Moreover, when they have to work with someone who is not willing to talk and does not have close relationship with, they seem to feel it is difficult for them to complete the task as a group. When I asked about the disadvantages of group work, M and O answered as follows:

*M: yappari, nanto iuka tune higo kara anmari iken ga awahenwa toiu ko to yaruto, chotto yarinikuina toha omoimaukeredomo... (When I need to work with someone who I am in disagreement with on many things... I think it's not enjoyable for me to work in a group.)*

*O: maa, donna kadai ni shitemo, sora, guruupu de yatta houkatanoshi desu kedo, menbaa ni yotteha shaberi nikui hito to yattara chotto...iya kana. (Whatever the task is... I think I like working in group more than working individually... but I don't like working with someone who I don't like talking with.)*

*K: ah...onna no ko yakara...ah...otokonokoto doushi yattara, meccha shabereru to omoun desukedo... (It's because I had to work with girls... if the group consists of only boys, I can talk more.)*

In addition, K and O provided the names of students who they do not want to work with, and those students seem to share some characteristics, including a lack of English skills and uncooperative attitudes. This seems to support the possible detrimental factors in group work claimed by Li and Campbell (2008).

*Characteristics of ideal member to work with*

For the ideal member to work with, O and M reported that it is easier for them to work with someone who talks a lot, expresses his or her opinions openly, and has leadership. Responding to the question asking what kind of student she would like to work with, M said:

*M: gutai mei wo dasu to, Tkun mitai ni warito hakihakito jibunno ikenwo ittekureru... nanntoiuka, riidaashippu totte shabette kureru ko ga yariyasui. (It's easier for me to work with someone like T-kun who expresses his opinions...I mean, someone who took on a role of leader)*

In this focus group, Y talked to all the members, paid attention to how each member's work was going, and showed outstanding leadership. These factors seem to be important to facilitate group work.

*About Student M*

M was really quiet and did not interact with other members. The interview revealed that K generally seems to have negative impression about M. He reported that M usually does not work hard in individual work.

*K: M-san toka, ittumo mitemasukedo, kaisetuno kami toka zenzen yatte nakute...ah, koitu yaran neyatte... (M...I watch how she is working in class... I know she doesn't work hard in individual work...I think she is a lazy student)*

*K: itumo M-san toka hanashi kitottara, aitsu yariyorahen. (I heard about M from another classmate, who often work with M, they say M isn't a hard worker.)*

K, however, reported that, M was not problematic in working with in group because she at least completed what she had to do for the group. O also reported that she did not mind working with M because she did her job.

*O : buntan sareta bun wa chanto yarunde daijoubu desu. I think it's OK working with her because she*

*at least completed the assigned work.)*

This indicates that students seem to emphasis on making some contribution to the group work when evaluating group members, which supports Kagan's (1992) second principle, individual accountability.

**Limitation of this study***Student-teacher relationship (Reflexivity)*

In the interview, it was very difficult for me to have teenage participants talk. It certainly depends on the student's personality, however teenage students generally are not willing to communicate with adults, especially with teachers. I have known these four interviewees very well since I had taught them before. I thus guesses the teacher-student relationship might have made it difficult for the participants to talk more and tell their true feelings. Tani's study (2005) found teacher-student relationships can be a factor which contributes to students' silence. I did not feel that they told her a lie but this relationship might have limited information they could provide in the interview.

*The interview questions*

Another reason that the interview was unable to elicit more talk from the students is the way I asked questions. Analyzing the transcriptions revealed that there were so many only hai (yes)-responses by the students. This happened because most questions I asked them were closed-ended questions, or yes-no questions. Moreover, I failed to ask follow-up questions. This experience indicates it is important to learn interview skills in order to obtain more data from participants.

*Dealing with silence and manipulating the students' responses*

The transcriptions showed that I frequently restated students' responses, like "so you mean it is better for you to work with other students, right?" Additionally, I tended to lead the students responses, like "I guess you did not talk very much because you were videotaped, is it right?" This seems to have happened partly because I was not able to resist the urge to fill the silence, and as a result, I tended to talk more than the interviewees. Moreover, when I asked my colleague

to listen to the interviews and read the interview transcripts, he reported that he had an impression that the interviewer seemed to manipulate the participants' response so that I could get the results I wanted to get.

#### *Ethical concerns*

The informed consent was done orally, by explaining the purpose of this study and telling the students that the participation is on a voluntary basis. While the participants were allowed to refuse to cooperate with this study, they might have felt some kind of pressure that they were obliged to participate in this research because of teacher-student relationship. Although a written consent form should have been given to the participants, I decided not to provide the form to them. One of the reasons is that if that kind of official form had been given to them, they might have felt awkward because they are not familiar with that kind of form in their culture, and might have caused unnecessary anxiety.

## 5. Conclusion

The data collection for this research project included various problems, such as the types of questions, the interviewee's leading attitudes, and the method of getting the informed consent. However, the data indicates students' positive attitudes toward group work activity over individual activity. It also revealed the advantages such as helping each other, reducing the individual workload, encouraging low level students to participate in the activity. In addition, this study revealed some factors teachers should consider for successful group work activity, such as physical layout of the class, task types, and composition of group members.

This study is a case study and had only one target group as participants. For the future research, various types of participant groups, such as successful and unsuccessful groups, should be included. In addition, in order to get data that is not affected by the teacher-student relationship, having students discuss about group work might provide more interesting data to study students' perception on group work activity.

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