

Let's Learn to Write Better through Collaboration!

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This paper discusses two research questions in a Japanese university writing class where a variety of Collaborative Learning (CL) activities such as cooperative writing and peer review activities were provided: a) *What do students think of CL activities?* And b) *what have they learned through CL activities?* The data analyzed include students' written work, which comprised reflections on their writing activities, as well as responses to a questionnaire given at the end of the semester. The data revealed that a large number of students perceive CL activities as helpful to enhancing learner responsibility, which is essential for learner autonomy that promotes continued learning outside class. Many students appreciated CL activities because they found that these activities helped to improve their writing ability, providing ample feedback to their writing as well as a sense of purpose in writing activities and a responsibility in group work.

この論文では協働によるライティングやピア・レビュー活動など、様々な協働学習(CL)活動が提供された日本の大学でのライティングの授業における2つの研究課題について論じる。1つは学生はCL活動をどのようにとらえているのか、そしてもう1つは、学生がCL活動を通して何を学んだのか、である。分析に使用されたデータは、ライティング活動についての内省を記したもので、そして学期末に実施したアンケートへの回答である。それによると、多くの学生が、CL活動が学習者の責任感を強めることに役立ったとしている。それは授業外でのさらなる学習を促進する学習者オートノミーにおいて不可欠な要素である。多数の学生がCL活動は自分の書いたものに対して豊富なフィードバックを、そしてライティング活動における目的意識とグループ活動における責任感を与えたとし、その価値を認めた。

This study examines how students perceived Collaborative Learning (CL) activities and what they learned in a Japanese university writing course in which many CL activities such as cooperative writing and peer review activities were implemented. Writing, which seemingly is individual work, can be done much more successfully through collaborative processes, and students can become aware of this fact by actually participating in such activities (Shimo, in press).

The data analyzed for this study include students' written work (reflective writing on their writing activities) and responses to a questionnaire given at the end of the semester. The reflections, also submitted at the end of the semester as a component of their portfolio, covered reactions to the writing activities completed both in and out of class, as well as what students had learned through them.

The survey and student reflections revealed that most students held favorable attitudes towards CL activities. This study suggests that CL activities can play an important role in "Language Learning for Life": they help individuals get motivated and become more responsible for their learning, and this responsibility is essential for learner autonomy that promotes continued learning outside of class. In addition, the

study suggests that CL activities can help to improve writing ability by providing students not only with ample feedback to their writing, but also a sense of purpose towards their writing activities.

This paper first describes the teaching context and defines CL activities and introduces samples. It then illustrates the research method and discusses the findings on the students' perceptions regarding CL activities. Student comments and reactions to CL activities will be shared to explore the two research questions:

- a) What do students think of CL activities?
- b) What have they learned through CL activities?

While CL activities have great potential to positively influence student affect, cognition, and meta-cognition, problems existed in the process of implementation. Problems and possible solutions will be discussed at the end of the paper.

Teaching Context

This writing course was offered to sophomores at a public university in southern Japan. The course was presented at two different levels, basic and advanced, and comprised a portion of the compulsory requirements for graduation. Students were able to choose their level—basic or advanced—on their own, according to their interests, purposes, and perceived levels. The data was collected from four classes—one advanced and three basic classes. There were 21 to 30 students in each class. The students majored in Intercultural Studies with a primary focus on foreign issues

and affairs, and many were relatively interested in learning English. Each class meeting was held once a week for 90 minutes, and the course was conducted over a period of twelve weeks.

Course activities included journal writing, paragraph and essay writing, grammar awareness-raising activities, and group projects (e.g. creating a newsletter or a pamphlet). The major objectives of these activities included promoting writing fluency, developing academic writing skills (learning about topic sentences, thesis statements, paragraph development, introduction-body-conclusion style essays), increasing writing accuracy, and enhancing collaborative skills in writing activities. Many processes of peer review and revision were implemented within these activities. Portfolio assessment instead of traditional tests was used for student evaluation, and students were encouraged to monitor their learning processes, assessing their own progress through reflections made in the process of constructing a portfolio.

Collaborative Learning Activities

The argument that group activities are not necessarily CL activities (Jacobs, 2003, September) may come as a pleasant surprise. According to Jacobs, Power, and Loh (2002), the following principles are featured in CL activities: *positive interdependence, collaborative skills, simultaneous interaction, individual accountability, group autonomy, and CL assessment*. CL activities are designed in consideration of these principles, and allow the individual student to participate and contribute to the group. The structure of learning activities can be negotiated between teacher

and students. One concern that teachers often identify in group activities is that some students tend to depend on hardworking students. However, CL activities are different from group activities in that they assist students in taking responsibility for their individual tasks or roles more effectively (Jacobs et al., 2002; also see Shimo, in press).

Sample CL activities in this study included an interview practice activity, newsletter or pamphlet creation, and peer review activities of the newsletter or pamphlet creation and other activities such as journal and essay writing. Shimo (in press) discusses the interview practice activity in depth in terms of CL principles. Its main objective is to develop skills for collecting information for writing. Students decide on an interview theme, formulate questions and possible responses, and rehearse with their group members for the real interview they conduct later. They work individually, in pairs, and in groups of four at different stages of this activity.

In the newsletter or pamphlet creation, students worked in small groups of about four. Each member contributed an article of at least 300 words. They shared drafts and gave feedback to each other in the process of creating the whole product.

In addition, students were engaged in other peer review activities. They shared journal entries, made a summary, and gave comments about what they liked and what they wanted to know more about. They also shared their essays on a given topic (“studying at school vs. studying at home” or “asking a question of a famous person”) and gave feedback in terms of, for example, how well a thesis statement was expressed, how well topic sentences were used, and whether each paragraph was coherent. The peer

review checklist provided in Smalley and Ruetten (1995) was used in this activity, and questions included in the checklist asked students to review content and organization of the written piece. The teacher gave corrective feedback on a few of the linguistic errors and mistakes. The students were not required to do likewise, but some in these classes commented on linguistic problems, while comments mainly focused on content and organization.

Research Method

A questionnaire¹ was given to the students at the end of the semester to explore one of the research questions, namely, what they thought of CL activities. The questions were written in Japanese (the students' first language), so that they would have no trouble understanding them. Fifty-three statements concerning perceptions about CL activities were provided calling for responses using 5-point Likert-scale answers: I don't think so at all (1 point), I don't think so (2), neutral (3), I think so (4), and I strongly think so (5). Eighty-eight out of 106 students responded to the questionnaire.

In addition to the questionnaire, student *reflection essays* were used to explore the two research questions: a) What do students think of CL activities? And b) what have they learned through CL activities? At the end of the semester, the students reflected on their writing activities and their progress in writing ability in a reflective essay of about 250 English words. Reflection essays from ninety-seven students were examined for this study.

Learners' Reactions to CL activities²

Table 1. Students' perceptions of CL activities (1) n=88

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Average
Q13	It is fun to work in a pair.	4	7	21	45	11	0	3.59
Q15	It is beneficial to work in a pair.	2	3	20	53	10	0	3.75
Q16	I like to work in a pair.	6	7	30	36	9	0	3.40
Q17	It is fun to work in a group of three or more.	5	12	14	45	11	1	3.52
Q19	It is beneficial to work in a group of three or more.	2	8	13	54	11	0	3.73
Q20	I like to work in a group of three or more.	5	16	24	32	11	0	3.32

Responses: (1) I don't think so at all. (2) I don't think so. (3) Neutral. (4) I think so. (5) I strongly think so. * No response.

Many of the students expressed favorable attitudes towards CL activities, as can be seen in the results in Table 1, especially in the responses to Q13, Q15, Q17, and Q19. Students' comments in their reflection essays indicated that CL activities help them make more discoveries about classmates, make more friends, and are fun and enjoyable. From the responses, it can be inferred that these activities help students learn different values and opinions. These activities provide a sense of responsibility,

a sense of autonomy, a sense of unity, and a great sense of achievement when the work is completed. They also help to promote peer and self-assessment, enhance motivation, develop collaborative skills, and learn the importance of collaboration. The responses to the two questions asking whether group activities are beneficial to them, Q15 and Q19, show that students think highly of such activities (Table 1). The fact that the average score of the responses to these two questions beginning with "It is beneficial" is higher than the average of Q16 and Q20, questions beginning with "I like" indicates that some students understand the benefits of CL activities even if they do not like the learning style very much.

Based on these student affirmations, CL activities can be seen to have a positive influence on various aspects of cognition, meta-cognition, and affect. Especially in regard to affective aspects, many students not only simply enjoy the activities themselves, but also appreciate the discoveries they make through the activities, as well as the process of making discoveries. They develop special feelings among classmates with whom they work. As a result, their motivation is kept high or made even stronger. In regards to meta-cognitive aspects, a sense of responsibility and autonomy are the keys in collaborative learning situations.

Moreover, research has supported the concept that successful language learners are strongly motivated and have high meta-cognitive abilities such as the ability to monitor, evaluate, make learning choices and decisions, and plan their learning (Chamot, Barnhardt, & Robbins, 1999; Wenden, 1991). Therefore, when positive affect and meta-cognitive abilities are promoted, it can be expected that cognitive abilities also develop more effectively.

The following sections will discuss students' reactions in terms of responsibility for learning, motivation for learning, and improvement of writing skills, the three viewpoints related mainly to meta-cognition, affect, and cognition, respectively. Many student comments fall into the first two categories. In terms of cognition, I assume that CL activities can promote all different kinds of language skills, but since the teaching context dealt in this paper is a writing course, I will focus on improvement of writing skills.

a) Responsibility for Learning

Table 2. Students' perceptions of CL activities (2) n=88

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Average
Q35	I felt responsible for my actions due to collaborative activities.	1	2	10	50	25	0	4.09
Q39	Working in a pair or in a group will enhance autonomy.	3	5	26	46	8	0	3.58
Q50	I thought other people would be put at a disadvantage if I didn't study.	1	3	14	44	24	2	4.01

Responses: (1) I don't think so at all. (2) I don't think so. (3) Neutral. (4) I think so. (5) I strongly think so. * No response.

Table 2 shows student perceptions about CL activities in terms of their sense of responsibility and autonomy. It indicates that a large number of students found a strong relation between CL and their sense of responsibility. The reason the average of the responses to Q39 (*Working in a pair or a group will enhance autonomy.*) was not as high as the other two may be because some students could not clearly conceptualize what autonomy meant.³ It is intriguing that 80-90% of the students seem to agree that CL activities allow them to take more responsibility for their own activities.

The following student comments (unedited), especially the underlined parts (underlining added by the author), indicate their heightened sense of responsibility:

- *I tackled this class very enthusiastically. Since we communicated with the shoulder partner in many cases during class, I attended the all class. It is because trouble is made to my partner if I rest [or if I am absent]. I think it very good to cooperate with a shoulder partner.⁴*
- *Group members were very kind and cooperated with each other. I think I could know English levels of members in a group project, and I could also know my level. I did my best not to trouble to them because my English level was very low.*

Interestingly, one student pointed out in the survey that students must attend the class whether there are CL activities or not. However, it is probably true of many students that CL activities gave them a reason to attend the class. The average result of the questionnaire item "*I felt that I should attend the class because there were collaborative activities*" was 3.92.

In addition, students have gained collaborative skills, which are useful for them in assuming control and responsibility over their learning, as the next comments indicate:

- ...group work need effort. And every person's sense of responsibility is important. Our group portioned out charge according to the theme. It was pleasant to have worked by carrying out a role assignment. How to write a text which all the members understand was devised. Through this group work, I know that the necessity for mutual cooperation and the importance of employing one's power efficiently as had as possible in it.
- ... we had some clash of our views or idea. However, we could create better [product] than we thought taking advantage of such as some clashes.
-We set homework of each other in group-project so that we would not get behind in our work.

CL activities provided the students with a space where they make autonomous decisions to control where their learning goals are heading to. Moreover, collaborative skills, such as *showing agreement and disagreement, negotiating with others, compromising with others, appreciating differences, assigning tasks to the individuals or sharing responsibilities by distributing them equally among group members, having further or deeper discussion, and planning carefully*, were observed in student learning processes.

b) Motivation for Learning

The following comments from students indicate that they were motivated by CL activities, or they made use of the learning opportunities to maintain their motivation:

- ... the member of a group taught kindly what I have not understood. Moreover, when having abolished the motivation for a while, the member encouraged [me not to give up].
- Poor discussion connects losing motivations. We made time for meeting then we did the best to each job.
- I thought what a great everyone is and I reckoned them as a rival because I am a very competitive man. That is way this class has motivating and this is good for me.

It should be pointed out, however, that some students did not find CL activities very motivating. One student wrote in his reflection that “... *good points of group project and pair group activities must not show up [cannot be revealed] without members of my group or pair student's cooperation and efforts. I regret that my group members and my pair student are not much enervated.*” As the underlined words indicate, there were one or two groups that did not function well enough because there were learners who were unmotivated or uninterested in cooperating with others. The causes of this phenomenon are complicated—perhaps, instructions were not clear, the task was too difficult or too easy, the topic or the theme of the activity was irrelevant to their life, or a conflict existed among group members (see the section entitled “Problems in CL activities and Possible Solutions” below; also see Shimo, in press.). It

may not be easy to solve these problems, but it is clear that teachers must ensure opportunities to build connections or rapport among group members to get students motivated. In other words, students need plenty of time for discussion or negotiation among group members within a structure where each can contribute to the group work, perhaps in different ways, but in the way that allows individuals equal participation, a sense of responsibility regarding their contributions, and a sense of satisfaction as a result.

c) Improvement of Writing Skills

Table 3. Students' perceptions of CL activities (3) n=88

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Average
Q24	It is beneficial to receive comments from classmates on my written work.	2	4	10	45	27	0	4.09
Q25	It is beneficial to read classmate's written work.	2	1	7	49	29	0	4.16

Responses: (1) I don't think so at all. (2) I don't think so. (3) Neutral. (4) I think so. (5) I strongly think so. * No response.

Many students seem to have acquired writing skills through the act of reading their classmate's writing. As the results of Q25 show, 78 students out of 88 answered that they (strongly) thought that it was beneficial to read their classmate's written work (Table 3). In addition, not only did

the students find reading classmates' writing beneficial, but they also appreciated the comments that they received from peers. Seventy two students responded that they (strongly) thought it beneficial to receive comments on their writing from their classmates (Q24, Table 3).

Moreover, many comments in the reflection essays indicated that students reflected upon and self-assessed their own writing activities during and after reading others' written work (e.g., journal entries, essays), as well as in response to comments from others. Through such self-reflection and self-assessment, students reported that they were able to learn from their peers a) new expressions, b) interesting topics to write about, c) how to better explain or support the topic, and d) how to better develop a paragraph or an essay.

The following comments illustrate these findings:

- ... I was always dissatisfied with my English skill in these activities. I think the reason why I was always dissatisfied with my English skill is that we did pair activity or group activity at many times in this class. I read journals of my classmate, and I noticed the lack of my English skill. I compared my journal with journal of my classmate, and I thought that topic of my journal is not so interesting and my journal has many mistakes.
- ... Another thing I enjoyed is reading someone's journal. There are some discoveries. For example, theme I don't conceive. It becomes reference. And above all, I can know about the man by reading journal.

- ... I think that to show my journal to my friend is good point. Because, when I read my friend's journal, I can read good journal. So I can get power of English.

Students also found it useful to read comments from their classmates about their written work. The following is a student's assessment of her own writing performance:

- I noticed the first time my mistaking how to use English when other people point out. Therefore, it becomes the better completely sentence because I rewrote my essay twice. I have thought that my statement is clearly, but my partner pointed out that write the same things again, and is lack of inviting. Through I repeated it again and again, it is useful for me, and I understood clearly my point of attention when I write English essay.

The final student comments that she would not have noticed her own mistakes until others pointed them out. Her assessment of her own work was that the thesis statement was clear, but that the essay still remained unimpressive. She received the same partner feedback on both the first and second drafts. She appreciated the feedback because she could identify areas that needed more work. Thus, reading comments from peers, as well as classmates' essays and journal entries, can promote self-reflection and self-assessment in writing activities.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of CL activities (4) n=88

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Average
Q29	I think I should make a greater effort when I have to show my writing to others.	2	7	11	49	19	0	3.86

Responses: (1) I don't think so at all. (2) I don't think so. (3) Neutral. (4) I think so. (5) I strongly think so. * No response.

Furthermore, in the process of sharing their written work with classmates, students were able to reveal more about themselves and learn more about their classmates. Such activities increased the joy of reading. More importantly, peer review activities promoted more audience-oriented, meaningful writing. Students were able to write for an audience. The responses to Q29 show that many students were conscious of the readers (Table 4). A number of student comments also illustrate this effect. The following comment is one of them:

- I learned writing my journal to not only hand out but also reader. I wrote my journals as awake to reader. This attempt changed content of my journals. I thought about reader of my journal when I wrote my journal, and I came to want to write about thing that I really want to say for someone. Thanks to this attempt, I didn't so tire to write my journals. I think that pair activity and group activity made my writing activity more solid thing than personal activity. This classes that taken in pair activity and group activity is very benefit class for my writing learning."

CL activities thus allowed students to receive ample feedback and opportunities to learn writing skills from their classmates. These activities promoted self-reflection and self-assessment and therefore increased opportunities for students to set goals. They also helped to add meaning to writing activities.

Problems in CL activities and Possible Solutions

Table 5. Students' perceptions of CL activities (5) n=88

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	*	Average
Q6	It is troublesome to work in a pair or in a group outside the class.	3	3	12	53	17	0	3.89
Q10	It is troublesome to work in a pair or in a group inside the class.	12	33	17	18	8	0	2.74

Responses: (1) I don't think so at all. (2) I don't think so. (3) Neutral. (4) I think so. (5) I strongly think so. * No response.

Several problems were identified in implementing CL activities: a) absent or uninterested students, b) time constraints, c) schedule conflicts among group members out of class, and d) lack of clarity in instructions.

The teacher can deal with the problem of absent or uninterested students by making use of home groups (i.e. groups in which students regularly work) and improvised

groups (i.e. temporary groups made on the spot), or by having groups change occasionally. If a student is often absent and his or her partner is always assigned to a different group, then the student might feel shy or embarrassed. Rather than assigning the student to a new group all the time, the teacher can have all students form new groups. It is also good to have students work in their home groups so they develop strong relationships among group members and can better support members who tend to be absent or are not very much interested in class activities.

As for the extensive time necessary for CL activities, the teacher has to carefully plan activities to be completed in class and those to be finished outside, because it is important to make full use of limited class hours. The objectives of in-class tasks and activities must be articulated carefully and clearly, and tasks and activities should motivate students and get them ready to work outside the class.

Some students commented that it was difficult to find out-of-class meeting times convenient for all group members (cf. Q6 & Q10 in Table 5). In order to reduce schedule conflicts, teachers might consider planning and announcing project work well in advance. Especially for an important group project, the plan should be designed and shared with students several weeks or more before the due date.

Finally, instructions for CL activities can sometimes be quite complicated because all the individuals are assigned defined and often differing tasks, and it is not unusual that all group members are doing different tasks at one point. To ensure clarity in instructions, such instructional strategies as stating the purpose of the activity, providing an example of the activity by having one group demonstrate it in

front of the class, using written instructions, and giving a supplementary explanation in Japanese would be helpful.

It is well established that students have different preferences in learning styles. While some find CL activities fun and enjoyable, others do not. The level or features of student motivation, linguistic level, and interests probably influence how they perceive CL activities. It may also depend on the day whether CL activities work well or not. The teacher should always observe student reactions and levels of understanding and be flexible and willing to address such problems.

Conclusion

Many of the students involved in this study perceived CL activities as being enjoyable and beneficial. Moreover, they considered that CL helped to enhance their writing ability. This study cannot indicate a cause and effect relationship between CL activities and improvement of student writing skills. Although students reported that they became able to write more fluently and in more detail about individual topics and learned more about essay organization, these processes being observed in their written work during the semester and in their portfolios submitted at the end of the semester, the data provided is insufficient to conclude that CL activities encouraged these processes because a comparison study with a control group was not conducted.

The CL activities discussed in this paper included activities in which students worked to produce individual written products (i.e. individual essays and journal entries) in collaboration with others and activities in which students

created one written product (i.e. newsletter or pamphlet) in collaboration with group members. More careful examination of each kind of activity and its effects on language learning may be necessary.

Nevertheless, CL activities provided students with ample feedback on their writing and the students appreciated it. The feedback enabled students to experience more opportunities for self-reflection, self-assessment, and goal-setting. CL also helped to add meaning and a sense of purpose to writing activities, allowing the students to be more audience-oriented.

Furthermore, CL activities provide a sense of responsibility in group work. CL activities have great potential to enhance student motivation to learn and improve their collaborative skills. In CL activities, students are practicing learner autonomy while in groups and have many opportunities to make choices and decisions through collaboration. Since individual students are assigned certain tasks and roles, they are all responsible for the group work. CL activities thus help individual students become more responsible for their learning, an essential element of learner autonomy. This is likely to promote continued learning outside of class, which will lead to “language learning for life.” Therefore, CL activities hold the key to what Little (2003, June) calls, “studying not independently [not all by yourself], but autonomously” in collaboration with others.

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Notes

- ¹ The questionnaire is available in both Japanese and in English by contacting the author.
- ² Student comments in the text are unedited. However, underlining was added to students comments by the author to emphasise the sentences related to the context of the paper. Parenthesized words were added by the author to clarify meaning.
- ³ A number of students explained what autonomy meant in another question in the questionnaire. Their definitions include fulfilling one's own role responsibly, doing what one has to do so that others won't get in trouble, being aware of what one has to do and doing it responsibly, and contributing one's own ideas in group work.
- ⁴ A shoulder partner means a person sitting beside one in a group, while a face partner means a person sitting in front of one in a group (Jacobs, 2003, September).