

Course choices and attitude toward group work

Kumiko Fushino

Temple University Japan

Reference data:

Fushino, K. (2006). Course choices and attitude toward group work.

In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

As communicative language teaching movement prevails, more teachers have started to use group work (GW) in their English classes. However, little is known about how students view GW. This study is an investigation of the differences in students' views of GW, using two groups of students from different English courses. It is hypothesized that students in a course where production is emphasized (communicative course) and those in a course where more traditional receptive skills and cultural knowledge are focused on (language and culture course) have different attitude toward GW. Knowledge of these differences will give teachers a clue for more effective instruction. A questionnaire was administered to 274 first-year university students in September, 2004. The result shows that students in the communicative course had more positive attitudes toward GW than those in the language and culture course. Some pedagogical implications will be suggested based on the results of the investigation.

コミュニケーション・ランゲージ・ティーチングが広まるにつれ、より多くの教師がグループワークを英語の授業で使うようになってきている。しかし、学生がグループワークをどのように見ているかについてはほとんど知られていない。本研究では、2つの異なる英語のコースに属する学生がグループワークをどのように見ているかについて探った。コミュニケーションコースの学生と言語文化コースの学生はグループワークについて異なる見方をしていると考えられる。その差がはっきりすれば、各コースにおいてより効果的な指導方法を探る手助けとなるだろう。質問紙が用意され、2004年9月に274名の大学1年生に実施された。その結果、コミュニケーションコースの学生は言語文化コースの学生よりもグループワークについてポジティブな見方をしていることがわかった。この結果に基づいて、教育上の示唆を提示する。

This study focuses on how communication apprehension among students in L2 group work (GW) is related to their beliefs about GW in college English classrooms. Communication apprehension (CA) is defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1984, p. 13). Beliefs comprised (a) the value of cooperation, (b) the efficiency of GW, (c) academic growth in GW, (d) the relationship with other members, and (e) teacher/student roles in college classrooms. I also investigated how students in two different English courses view GW

and how their CA in L2 group work differ. It is hypothesized that students in a course where production is emphasized (the Communicative Course) have lower communication anxiety and more positive beliefs about GW than those in a course where the focus is on more receptive skills and cultural knowledge (the Culture and Language Course).

In particular, the following four research questions were posed:

1. What levels of L2 communication apprehension in group work do university students in Japan have?
2. What beliefs do students have about the five aspects of group work?
3. What is the relationship between each of the five beliefs about group work (mentioned above) and L2 communication apprehension in group work?
4. Are there any significant differences in the level of L2 communication apprehension and beliefs about group work among students in the two different English courses?

Research method

The participants

A questionnaire was administered to 274 first-year university students in Tokyo who were present at the beginning of the fall semester (September 2004). There were 102 male students, 169 female students, and three students who did not indicate their gender on the questionnaire (Appendix 1). The *mean* age was 19 (*SD* = 1.1), and 264 students were Japanese. Students

were taking either the Communicative Course (COM) or the Culture and Language Course (CUL). The COM focuses on the development of productive communication skills, while the CUL emphasizes more receptive skills and expanding cultural knowledge. Students chose one of the courses at the beginning of the spring semester. Students in both the COM and CUL were enrolled in four 90-minute English lessons (each focusing on different skills) a week throughout the freshman year with the same class members.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire, which was written in Japanese, consisted of six parts with 12 items in each part. Thus, there were a total of 72 5-point Likert scale items with “5” being “strongly agree” and “1” being “strongly disagree”. The English translation of the questionnaire is presented in Appendix 2. The items were intended to measure the following six constructs (refer to Fushino 2005, for more detailed description of the questionnaire making process). The reliability of the questionnaire as a whole (all 72 items) was .84. Cronbach’s alpha for each part is indicated in the parentheses below:

Part A: Communication apprehension in GW ($\alpha = .88$)

Six items were adapted from PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1982)

B: Beliefs about the value of cooperation (.85)

C: Beliefs about the efficiency of GW (.80)

D: Beliefs about academic growth in GW (.79)

E: Beliefs about the relationship with other members (.61)

F: Beliefs about teacher/student roles in college classrooms (.74)

Data screening process and statistical analyses

In order to answer the research questions, descriptive statistics based on the Rasch logit scores were obtained using Winsteps software (refer to Bond and Fox, 2001 for a detailed description of the Rasch model; see also Fushino, 2005, for more detailed explanation of the Rasch results). The Rasch model was employed instead of using raw scores because Rasch logits are interval scale data, and they take into account true item agreeability/endorsability. A logit score of 0 means a neutral orientation toward the construct measured. Positive scores show positive orientation, and negative scores indicate negative orientation. For instance, if a person has a logit score of 0 for Part A, it means the person has a neutral degree of CA. The higher the logit score is, the more communication apprehensive the person is, and the lower the logit score is, the less communication apprehensive the person is. The Rasch person logits were transformed to z -scores to find outliers.

Pearson correlation coefficient ($\alpha = .05$) and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were then computed ($\alpha = .05$). Before conducting a MANOVA, certain assumptions were checked (equal sample size, missing data, normal distribution, presence of outliers, linearity, multicollinearity) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). First, samples with missing data were eliminated, and univariate outliers ($\geq |3.29|$) and multivariate outliers (≥ 112.32 Mahalanobis distance) were excluded listwise. As a result of this data screening process, the original $N = 274$ was reduced to 246.

To make interpreting the data easier, a balanced design was employed that made each cell contain the same number of students (91 students in each cell). Since quite a few

data had to be discarded in this process, an independent t -test ($\alpha = .01$) was conducted to make sure the 91 students selected were not significantly different from the rest of the students in the CUL course in any one part. Results showed no difference between those included in the study and those which were excluded. None of the t was statistically significant even after Bonferroni adjustment was done. Therefore, these randomly selected students were confirmed not to be different from the students excluded from the study. As for the COM students, only four students were excluded randomly, and this number was so small that no statistical tests were conducted. Then, normal distribution was checked again both statistically (skewnesses and kurtosis) and visually (histograms) for the COM, the CUL, and the total of 182 students. The distribution was found to be normal. Scatter plots were examined to check linearity and no deviation was found. Multicollinearity was checked by Box's test, and no multicollinearity was detected. After this series of process, it was clear that assumptions were met.

Results

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the six parts. Since Rasch person logits were used, the mean score of zero indicates the neutral tendency in each respective construct. Regarding communication apprehension (CA) in GW (Part A), students as a whole had a somewhat low level of communication apprehension ($M = -0.54$). Students in the COM course had the lower CA (-0.84), and those in the CUL course were almost neutral (-0.24). Both COM and CUL groups were found to have highly positive beliefs about the value of cooperation (Part

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for each part (based on Rasch person logit scores)

	Course	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurt
Part A (CA)	COM	-3.85	2.14	-0.84	1.07	-0.41	0.65
	CUL	-2.53	2.14	-0.24	0.92	0.13	0.52
	Total	-3.85	2.14	-0.54	1.04	-0.29	0.81
Part B (Value)	COM	-0.23	4.59	1.44	0.95	1.12	1.56
	CUL	-1.22	4.59	1.30	1.17	0.84	0.37
	Total	-1.22	4.59	1.38	1.07	0.86	0.70
Part C (Efficiency)	COM	-1.81	2.22	0.21	0.79	0.14	0.20
	CUL	-2.37	1.65	-0.04	0.77	-0.38	0.51
	Total	-2.37	2.22	0.09	0.78	-0.10	0.46
Part D (Academic growth)	COM	-0.43	3.27	1.07	0.80	0.67	0.39
	CUL	-0.97	3.96	0.79	0.84	0.73	1.39
	Total	-0.97	3.96	0.93	0.83	0.64	0.74
Part E (Relationship)	COM	-0.07	2.58	0.97	0.54	0.71	0.28
	CUL	-0.38	2.13	0.59	0.52	0.76	0.37
	Total	-0.38	2.58	0.79	0.56	0.60	0.15
Part F (Teacher/ student roles)	COM	-0.23	3.04	0.98	0.59	0.65	0.65
	CUL	-0.50	2.78	0.63	0.74	0.88	0.67
	Total	-0.50	3.04	0.81	0.71	0.61	0.39

B, 1.44, 1.30 respectively). COM and CUL students did not show much difference in the beliefs measured in Part B. As for Part C (beliefs about the efficiency of GW), students had neither highly positive nor highly negative beliefs. However,

a slight difference was found between COM students (0.21) and CUL students (-0.04). Part D (beliefs about academic growth in GW), Part E (beliefs about the relationship with other members), and Part F (beliefs about teacher/student roles in college classrooms) showed similar tendencies. Students in both the COM and the CUL courses were found to have relatively positive beliefs about each respective construct. However, COM students were generally more positive than CUL students about these beliefs.

Correlations. Table 2 shows the correlation coefficients among the six parts and the mean of each belief (Parts B-F). All correlation coefficients were statistically significant at $p = .01$. L2 communication apprehension (Part A) had moderately or weak negative correlations with all the belief parts and the mean of the five belief parts. This indicates that the students with less L2 communication anxiety had more positive beliefs about GW. The weak relationship (-.22) between Part A (CA) and Part B (Value) shows little association between CA and belief in the value of cooperation. Data from Table 1, which

Table 2. Correlation among the parts

	A	B	C	D	E	F	M
Part A (CA)	-	-.22	-.35	-.37	-.41	-.40	-.47
B (Value)		-	.38	.51	.35	.39	.72
C (Efficiency)			-	.65	.24	.44	.72
D (Academic growth)				-	.51	.46	.84
E (Relationship)					-	.43	.69
F (Teacher/student roles)						-	.74
M (B-F)							-

Note. M (B-F) = mean of Parts B-F. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

displays high mean scores on Part B (Value), indicates that regardless of the level of CA, students put a high value on cooperation.

All belief parts (Parts B-F) were positively correlated with each other. This indicates that if students have positive belief about one aspect of GW, they also have positive beliefs about the other aspects of GW. In particular, the correlation between Parts C (Efficiency) and D (Academic growth) was the strongest among all the combinations of belief parts. This indicates that the more students think GW is efficient, the more they believe they can grow academically by engaging in GW. It is not surprising that each belief part is moderately or strongly correlated with the mean score of the five belief parts because the mean score was calculated based on the five belief parts.

MANOVA. In order to investigate whether or not the differences between COM students and CUL students were statistically significant, a MANOVA was conducted, with the course serving as the independent variable and CA and the five beliefs as the dependent variables. The data is shown in Table

3. With the use of Wilks' criterion, the combined dependent variables were found to be significantly affected by the course choice, $F(1, 180) = 5.94, p \leq .05$. The results reflected a weak association between course choice (COM vs. CUL) and the combined DVs, partial $\eta^2 = .17$, with the observed power of .99.

To investigate which part was significantly affected by the IV, univariate analyses were performed. All the parts except Part B were statistically significantly ($F = 1.16, p = .28, \eta^2 = .01$) between the two course choices at $p \leq .05$. Since the same data were used for this analysis six times, a Bonferroni adjustment was done ($\alpha = .0083$). After the adjustment, the results for Parts A, E, and F were still statistically significant.

Discussion and interpretation

The findings indicate that with regard to question 1, students in both courses showed a low level of communication apprehension. As to question 2, student beliefs about the five aspects of group work, students showed a high positive regard for the value of cooperation, regardless of the course.

Table 3. Multivariate and univariate analyses of variance *F* ratios for course effects

	Multivariate				Univariate					
					Part A CA	B Value	C Efficiency	D Academic Growth	E Relationship	F T/S roles
Variable	df	<i>F</i>	Partial η^2	Observed Power	<i>F</i> (η^2)	<i>F</i> (η^2)	<i>F</i> (η^2)	<i>F</i> (η^2)	<i>F</i> (η^2)	<i>F</i> (η^2)
course	1	5.94**	.17	.99	13.59**	1.16	4.53*	5.33*	26.01**	13.58**
					(.08)	(.01)	(.03)	(.03)	(.13)	(.07)

Note. ** is significant at $p \leq .0083$. * is significant at $p \leq .05$.

Beliefs about the efficiency of group work were neutral, and beliefs about academic growth in group work were relatively positive. Furthermore, beliefs about the relationship with other members and about teacher/student roles in college classrooms were perceived somewhat positively.

With regard to question 3, the relationship between each of the five beliefs about group work and L2 communication apprehension in group work, the data yielded the following results. First, CA and the five beliefs negatively correlated, although the correlation between CA and the value of cooperation was weak. Second, in terms of the beliefs about group work, all parts correlated with each other, and they moderately or strongly correlated with the mean of the five belief parts.

As to question 4, the following results were obtained. First, the students in the two courses were different in L2 communication apprehension and beliefs about GW in general. Second, the students in the COM course had significantly lower levels of CA in GW and more positive beliefs about the relationship with other members and teacher/student roles than those in the CUL course. Third, there was no significance in the difference in the two groups' beliefs about efficiency of GW. In particular, the CUL students had slightly negative beliefs about GW efficiency. Fourth, the COM students showed somewhat more positive beliefs about academic growth in GW than the CUL students. Fifth, both the COM and CUL students showed highly positive beliefs about the value of cooperation.

The participants did not show strong CA based on their choice of course. The results contradict the findings of McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida's (1985) findings where

more than 70% of the Japanese college students showed high level of CA in both L1 and L2. A possible reason might be that there was the time lapse in the two studies. Because of the recent more communicative approaches in English education in Japan, the level of CA among Japanese students may have changed compared to that of students twenty years ago, when the earlier study was conducted. Another possible reason might be that the students in the present study have more hours of English instruction. They have four 90-minute English lessons a week, all taught in English, which is rather unusual for non-English majors in Japan. They may have had more exposure to English communication than the students in McCroskey et al.'s study (1985).

Second, the students in different courses were found to have different degrees of CA in L2 group work and in their beliefs about four aspects of GW. In all aspects, COM students had a more favorable orientation toward GW in English. They also perceived less CA in GW in English. One of the reasons for these differences can be explained by the communication apprehension theory (cf. McCroskey, 1982; McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1987). Students with higher levels of CA in L2 group work may tend to choose the CUL course, which emphasizes more receptive English skills and cultural awareness. As Dwyer (1998) reports, people with high CA do not often have enough communication skills to help them feel competent in an active, undirected learning environment. Therefore, it is understandable that students who chose the CUL course were likely to have higher levels of CA. The results of this study seem to at least partially confirm Dwyer's claim.

Another possibility is that COM students might have been exposed to GW more often than those in the CUL course during the spring semester. Therefore, their level of exposure and degree of familiarity in GW may have had led them to respond more favorably to the questionnaire. Likewise, because of the nature of the COM course, the COM students were considered to have more student-student interaction, which may have enabled them to feel intimate with each other and thus may have lessened their degree of CA. However, to confirm these interpretations, further studies are needed.

Finally, several pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study. When using group work for students with low group work readiness, it is advisable to introduce group work gradually in order to avoid unnecessary resistance and to decrease CA. In addition, teachers should provide a great deal of scaffolding, use heterogeneous grouping, emphasize the value of cooperation, and be patient. On the other hand, when using group work for classes with high group work readiness, teachers may be able to skip activities that familiarize students with small group work and teach the value of cooperation and how to cooperate in small groups. Instead, teachers may use more advanced cooperative learning group work activities, such as Group Investigation (Sharan & Sharan, 1999), and Academic Controversy (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), both of which require more spontaneous interaction among groupmates. Although it is still important for teachers to provide language help that enables students to conduct group work in English, teachers should also focus on facilitating learner autonomy. They should play a more supportive role such as a facilitator and a

consultant because those students are ready to become more self-directed learners. Learning together with groupmates will make them less reliant on the teacher and eventually help them become more independent learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found from this study that the students in this university were not communication apprehensive. It was also found that they had positive beliefs about L2 group work. CA and the five belief constructs negatively correlated, and all the beliefs about L2 group work correlated with each other. The students in the COM course were less communication apprehensive and more positively oriented toward L2 group work than those in the CUL course.

Kumiko Fushino is a doctoral student at Temple University Japan. She also teaches English at two universities in Tokyo. Her research interest is cooperative learning in L2.

References

- Bond, T. G., & Fox, C. M. (2001). *Applying the Rasch model: Fundamental measurement in the human sciences*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Dwyer, K. K. (1998). Communication apprehension and learning style preference: Correlations and implications for teaching. *Communication Education*, 47(1998), 137-150.
- Fushino, K. (2005). *Validating and Revising a Questionnaire on Students' Orientation toward Group Work in College English Classrooms*. Unpublished manuscript.

- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). *Learning together and alone: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1982). Oral communication apprehension: A reconceptualization. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 6* (pp. 13-38). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McCroskey, J. C. (1984). The communication apprehension perspective. In J. A. Daly & J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Avoiding communication : Shyness, reticence, and communication apprehension* (pp. 13-38). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- McCroskey, J. C., Gudykunst, W. B., & Nishida, T. (1985). Communication apprehension among Japanese students in native and second language. *Communication Research Reports*, 2(1), 11-15.
- McCroskey, J. C., Richmond, V. P., & McCroskey, L. L. (1987, n.s.). *Correlates of self-perceived communication competence*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the International Communication Association, Montreal, Canada.
- Sharan, Y., & Sharan, S. (1999). Group investigation in the cooperative classroom. In S. Sharan (Ed.), *Handbook of cooperative learning methods* (pp. 97-114). London: Greenwood Press.

Appendix 1

Descriptive statistics of the participants

N		Age		Nationality		Courses			
						CUL		COM	
Total	274	Mean	19	Japanese	264	Total	168	Total	106
Male	102	Median	19	Chinese	2	Male	54	Male	48
Female	169	Mode	19	Korean	4	Female	113	Female	56
Unknown	3	SD	1.1	Taiwanese	1	unknown	1	unknown	2
		Max	26	Unknown	3				
		Min	18						

Appendix 2

The Questionnaire Items Used in This Study (Translated from Japanese)

Part A: Communication apprehension in group work

1. I don't like to participate in group work.
2. I feel relaxed when I'm participating in group work.
3. I feel uneasy when I'm participating in group work.
4. I like to actively participate in group work.
5. I feel anxious when I work with those I don't know well in group work.
6. I feel nervous when I work in a group.
7. Group work is painful for me.
8. In group work, I feel more comfortable listening to other members' opinions than talking to group members.

9. I don't want to go to class if I have to participate in group work.
10. It is fun for me to talk with group members when working in a group.
11. When working in a group, I feel nervous if I am asked a question by other members.
12. In group work, I can't ask questions to other members because I feel embarrassed.

Part B: Beliefs about value of cooperation

1. It is important to help other group members when working in group.
2. Group work is important for human growth.
3. Group work is important for human society.
4. Cooperation produces better results than individual work.
5. If individuals can produce better results, cooperation is not necessary.
6. People produce better results in cooperative settings as opposed to competitive settings.
7. It is important to improve the English level in every group member when working in a group.
8. I feel guilty if I don't participate in group work.
9. For successful group work, it is important for each member to fulfill his/her share of responsibility.

10. Experience in the process of group work is valuable.
11. Group work is effective to facilitate students' autonomy.
12. Communication skills developed in group work are useful for my future.

Part C: Beliefs about efficiency of group work

1. I learn better in group work than in a teacher-centered class.
2. I learn more in group work than when I do my assignments alone in class.
3. Generally speaking, group work is time-consuming.
4. I learn more efficiently in group work than in teacher-led classes.
5. I learn more efficiently in group work than in working alone in class.
6. Group work is unproductive because our English is not good enough to do group work.
7. Generally speaking, the students in this class will work in groups well.
8. Generally speaking, it is waste of time to do group work.
9. I can use group work time efficiently for the assigned task.
10. I learn more efficiently when I cooperate with my peers than when I compete with them.

11. It may be difficult to stay on task in group work.
12. We solve questions more efficiently in group work than in teacher-led classes.

Part D: Beliefs about academic growth in group work

1. When listening to the discussions of other members, I notice my mistakes.
2. I can contribute to my group by sharing my opinions with others.
3. Even when I work alone, I can reach the same correct conclusions as when working in group.
4. When I have discussions with my group members, I can find answers to the questions that I couldn't find on my own.
5. Even if I don't speak out, I listen carefully to what my group members are saying.
6. During group work I learn various opinions and ideas from the other group members.
7. More knowledge is obtained through group work than in teacher-led classes.
8. Knowledge cannot be produced in group discussions.
9. When working in groups, students reach a better conclusion than working alone.
10. I will eventually be able to do things on my own that I can't do alone now but can do with the help of my group members.

11. I will learn better when I help group members than when I am listening to teacher's explanation.
12. Students are negatively influenced by inaccurate English spoken by other members in group work.

Part E: Beliefs about relationship with other members

1. I can learn good points of other members in group work.
2. Group work enables me to like my group members more.
3. Group members will be willing to help me in group work.
4. I will willingly help other group members in group work.
5. I will feel more comfortable asking questions to group members than to the teacher.
6. I will be upset if my group members point out my mistakes.
7. I will feel embarrassed if my group members point out my mistakes.
8. If a member of my group does not participate in group work, I will persuade him/her to join.
9. I do not care if a member of my group does not do his/her share of work.
10. If I say a different opinion from other group members, they will be upset.

11. If other members say a different opinion from mine, I will be uncomfortable.
12. It is likely that a few members might be treated lightly or ignored by other members in group work.

Part F: Beliefs about teacher/students roles in college classroom

1. Group work is not suitable for college English reading classes.
2. Teacher-led classes are more suitable for college education than group work.
3. Knowledge has to be conveyed to students by the teacher.
4. Students should speak only when they are called on by the teacher.
5. In college classes, students should play the central role.
6. Teacher's opinions are more important than the conclusions reached through group discussion.
7. Conclusions reached through group discussion are more valuable than the answers provided by the teacher.
8. Students should be involved in decision making regarding how classes are organized.
9. Students should say their opinions voluntarily in class.
10. When the teacher's opinion is different from the student, the student should accept what the teacher says.

11. The teacher should correct as much as possible all the mistakes students make.
12. In college classes, teachers should put more emphasis on developing students' autonomy than on transmitting knowledge.

Note. The items with underlined numbers were reverse coded when analyzing the data.