

# Student input, student motivation

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## Reference data

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This study has examined the extent that attitudes and beliefs regarding student-centered learning and motivation were affected by students involved in a six-week collaborative language learning activity where they were allowed to use their own materials. The participants of the study were Japanese EFL university students. All participating students completed a questionnaire before and after the learning activity quantifying and qualifying their own perceptions and motivation regarding the collaborative student-centered activity. The results of this study appear to indicate that making students aware of having their own choices in the classroom can be helpful and significantly increases their belief in what they are doing. The motivation of the participating students became higher when they pursued their own interests and negotiated with each other in a group. While the students still viewed their teacher as important, this type of learning activity appears to have made a positive impact on the students' opinions regarding collaborative student-centered learning.

本研究では6週間の協力的学習活動と学習者が選択した教材を授業に組み入れることが、学習者中心の英語学習や、動機に対する学習者自身の考え方や信条にどのような影響を及ぼすかについての調査が行われた。研究参加者は英語を学ぶ日本人大学生で、本調査の前には学習者中心の英語学習や動機に関しての質問紙による調査を実施した。結果として示唆されるのは、この体験が、自分たちで自ら英語学習教材を選択することは有効で楽しいものでありクラス内での学習は大切である、との認識を高めたことであった。またグループ内で議論し選択をした自分たちの興味を追求する際、彼らの動機は高まった。教師に対してのある程度の期待は調査の前後で変わらなかったが、このアクティビティーは、研究参加者の英語学習への取り組みや見解に肯定的な影響を与えた。

**R**ecent research on Second Language Acquisition has focused on the importance of how learners themselves control their own learning process, thereby taking on some of the responsibility for acquiring a target language. Collaborative group work has been recognized as one among several effective procedures used to maximize the opportunity for learners to take their own initiative in learning. Such group work emphasizes interaction among group members by using the target language to express themselves while negotiating. There has already been some research stating the interrelationship between students' motivation and collaborative work (Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003;

Murphey, 1998; Murphey & Jacobs, 2000; Ghaith, 2002; Ushioda, 1996).

Experience in teaching Japanese learners seems to endorse the effectiveness of using student collaboration, which seems to help students become protagonists of their learning with their intrinsic motivation. However, collaborative work is still not the main teaching and learning style in Japan. This present research emerges from an interest to investigate how learners view collaborative group work when they are encouraged to choose their own learning materials and take responsibility of creating lessons by hearing their opinions.

## Study background

### *Scene before the study*

Even though all of the students in this study were sophomores and juniors in a Japanese university majoring in English, the circumstances in Japan are such that they severely limit a student's opportunity to use the target language in the course of their daily lives. Students have very little exposure to use English once leave the classroom since it is not regularly used as a second language in Japanese society. Although English is considered an important language to study in Japan, it is mostly treated as a foreign language studied at school. This is quite different from learning in a country like the United States where English is used as a first language in regular society.

It is assumed that getting Japanese students to work collaboratively in an English class will force them to use English not only inside the classroom, but also to work on the assignment with other members in their group outside

the classroom. For example, group members may practice using English with each other when trying to accomplish a particular assignment, such as finding some English-written materials and being prepared to explain their contents to the whole class.

### *Related literature*

There are records of literature arguing the need to have second thoughts and rethink the relationship between teachers and learners. Freire (1970) contrasts this to “problem-posing education” where a dialogue exists between teacher and learner and the learner is an active co-researcher in creating dialogue.

Other philosopher such as Barnes (1975) introduces the dichotomy of *school knowledge* and *action knowledge*. In the case where the learner does not use this *school knowledge* in succeeding years, he/she will probably forget this type of knowledge. On the other hand, if the learner incorporates it into his/her own world-view, it changes into *action knowledge*, and the learner now owns it.

Krashen (1985) and Swain (1985) claim the significance of the learners' comprehensive input and output through interaction with others. Dörnyei (2001) advocates the importance of “the power of social identity” (p.38) emerged in a class through such interaction among students.

Kessler (1992) shows her views on collaborative learning as a humanistic, pro-social form of education. Kessler points out that when learners experience both teaching and being taught simultaneously, they gain both new knowledge and social competence that foster further learning.

There may be some presumed fears associated with the collaborative student learning process in terms of its effectiveness on advanced learners, as this style of learning might slow down the overall pace of learning in the classroom to their disadvantage. However, some researchers seem to be putting such fears to rest. For example, Crooks and Schmidt (1991), who generally believe that collaborative learning is most effective for slow learners, state that collaborative student learning allows average and advanced learners to better understand certain concepts through explaining ideas to their peers, because this process requires them to have cognitive elaboration and thought organization.

Murphey (1998) gives further recognition by coining the phrase *near peer role model* to describe how classmates become useful language models for other students because they often have a greater natural tendency to learn from one another through imitation and vicarious experience (Murphey & Jacobs 2000).

Ohta (1983), after four decades of teaching and researching educational theory and practice, has concluded that the aim of education should be to scaffold the young to be autonomous from within themselves (p.224). His research led to his own recognition that traditional Japanese education tends to ignore each learner and his/her sentiments. He states that “each learner never becomes his/her protagonist in his/her learning story in school” (p.54), and that “education should be the one which is helpful for learners to create their own selves” (p.74).

## Research questions

How are the attitudes of Japanese EFL university students affected regarding collaborative student-centered learning activities where they are allowed to choose their own study materials? To what extent has the motivation of these students for English language learning been influenced by their participating in a six-week long student-centered learning activity, as measured by pre-and-post questionnaires allowing them to answer both quantitatively on a 1-6 scale, and qualitatively by letting them offer open-ended reasons for their answers?

## Study description

### *Population and setting*

Research participants in this study were high-intermediate level EFL Japanese university students enrolled in a reading-focused course that met once a week for ninety minutes. Participants included thirty-four students: twenty-seven sophomores (eighteen females and nine males) and seven juniors (two females and five males) who had failed the course the previous year. All participating students willingly volunteered to be in this study. However, because of differences in the school calendar for sophomores and juniors, only sophomore participants were able to answer pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires. Before participating in the study, the students were mostly accustomed to traditional teacher-oriented language classes. However, as English majors, most of the participants had previously experienced some collaborative language learning activities in their freshman English classes.

### *Procedure and data collection*

This study was conducted over a six-week period with one ninety-minute class held each week. A questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered at the beginning and end of the six-week study. Question items used in this study were inspired from Cotterall (1999), “Key variables in language learning: what do learners believe about them?” another study consisting of ninety questionnaire-items designed to investigate how learners attributed their language learning success. The ninety questions used in Cotterall’s study were centered around six key variables and the last key variable, “the nature of language learning,” consisted of the following four questions: “I believe my language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom,” “I believe my language learning success depends on what I do in the classroom,” “I believe my language learning success depends on what my classmates do in the classroom,” and “I believe my language learning success depends on what the teacher does in the classroom.” These four question-items originating from Cotterall (1999) were adopted in this present study. In addition to these four questions, the first question, “I believe that students should be given choices in the assignments they do for class” (see Appendix A) was added because one of the main issues investigated in this present study was how learners view being able to control their learning by choosing their own learning materials which gave them ownership and lead to more autonomy in the overall learning process.

Participating students responded anonymously to the questionnaires. The quantitative part of data consisted of five items arranged in a six-point Likert scale format. The

qualitative part of data was obtained by students’ providing reasons for their responses. The same questionnaire was distributed to students before and after the collaborative student-centered learning activity to compare and contrast their answers. After the study, the participants were asked about their beliefs on collaborative language learning and student-centered learning class (Appendix B).

During the study, the ninety-minute classes were divided into two forty-five-minute sessions: I taught during the first half, while two groups gave presentations during the second half. Each group was asked to provide the class with a copy of an article on the topic of their choice, a summary of the article, and a vocabulary list.

### **Study results**

#### *Pre-and post-questionnaires*

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations of each question on the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire. Table 2-6 provides a breakdown of the frequency and percentage for each of the five questions respectively. The results of a *t*-test indicate that significant differences exist before and after the student-centered learning activity for Q2 (“I believe my language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom”) and Q3 (“I believe my language learning success depends on what I do inside of the classroom”). Although the statistical calculation failed to indicate significant mean (average) difference in Q1 (“I believe that students should be given choices in the assignments they do for class”), a dramatic change was shown. After the project, all the participants chose to

response to Q1 by answering either “I agree strongly” (11 students), “I agree” (10 students), or “I agree slightly” (6 students). These responses to Q1 suggest a trend of  $p = .06$ , meaning the difference is so subtle to be defined to exist.

Levene’s Test revealed a statistically different variance between the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire distributions for Q2, with an  $f$  value of 10.373 and a  $p$  value .002. For Q3, Levene’s Test indicated that the variance between the two distributions is not statistically different, with an  $f$  value of 0.55 and a  $p$  value of 0.462; thus, it was assumed that these two observations do not have a different variance. However, the  $t$ -test revealed 2.06 with a  $p$  value of 0.022, making a difference between the means for the pre- and post-questionnaires that was statistically significant. No significant differences were found between pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire answers for either Q4 or Q5.

As shown in Table 7, Item 3 (“Learning ability in student-centered vs. teacher-led activities”), almost half of the students (14 students) answered that they were the same or ambiguous because the nature of the two styles were too different to compare. However, nine students preferred student-centered learning styles. Reasons varied, though. Some noted it was good to be able to discuss opinions and communicate one’s own thoughts. They felt they could learn vocabulary and other language skills because they chose topics that are appealing to them. They liked that it was something new, and something they did not experience often in elementary, junior high, or high school. Others noted that when the class was student-centered, they were more relaxed as they studied while the class was teacher-led, they felt as if they were being made to study, which they did not enjoy

very much.

Seven students voted for teacher-led learning styles. One noted he/she was able to be actively involved but didn’t learn a lot in student-centered class. Another commented that since students were not professional teachers, it was better to learn from those who knew how to teach. One student commented that even though the students were prepared for their own presentation, when the other groups had their turns, they were only listening; they felt a lack of concentration when there was no instructor doing the teaching.

To elicit intercorrelation of variables, a two-tailed bivariate correlation analysis was conducted. There was no correlation between any items on the pre-questionnaire. However, modest or higher correlations were found in post-questionnaire: Q2 and Q3 with  $r = .49$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) meaning modest correlation. Q3 and Q4 with  $r = .43$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) meaning modest correlation. Q3 and Q5 with  $r = .64$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) meaning relatively strong correlation. These results indicated that the students, after the project, tended to view each element of what they did in the classroom, what they did outside the classroom, and what their teacher’s did interrelated to their language learning success.

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations of each question item**

Question	Pre-Questionnaire	Post-Questionnaire
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
1	2.444 (1.502)	1.815 (0.786)
2**	1.704 (0.724)	2.778 (1.423)
3*	2.926 (1.207)	2.333 (1.877)
4	3.370 (1.363)	3.370 (1.181)
5	2.222 (0.847)	2.444 (0.892)

Note: Scale: 1=strongly agree; 2=agree; 3=agree slightly; 4=disagree slightly; 5=disagree; 6=disagree strongly.

\*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$

**Table 2. Question 1 responses**

*(I believe that students should be given choices in the assignments they do for class.)*

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. I agree strongly	9	33.33	11	40.74
2. I agree	8	29.63	10	37.04
3. I agree slightly	4	14.81	6	22.22
4. I disagree slightly	2	7.41	0	0.00
5. I disagree	3	11.11	0	0.00
6. I disagree strongly	1	3.70	0	0.00
Mean (SD)	2.444 (1.502)		1.815 (0.786)	

**Table 3. Question 2 responses**

*(I believe my language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom.)*

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. I agree strongly	12	44.44	4	14.81
2. I agree	11	40.47	11	40.47
3. I agree slightly	4	14.81	5	18.52
4. I disagree slightly	0	0.00	2	7.41
5. I disagree	0	0.00	4	14.81
6. I disagree strongly	0	0.00	1	3.70
Mean (SD)	1.704 (0.724)		2.778 (1.423)	

**Table 4. Question 3 responses**

*(I believe my language learning success depends on what I do inside the classroom.)*

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. I agree strongly	2	7.41	4	14.81
2. I agree	8	29.63	12	44.44
3. I agree slightly	11	40.74	10	37.04
4. I disagree slightly	0	0.00	0	0.00
5. I disagree	4	14.81	1	3.70
6. I disagree strongly	2	7.41	0	0.00
Mean (SD)	2.926 (1.207)		2.333 (0.877)	

Table 5. Question 4 responses

(I believe my language learning success depends on what my classmates do in the class)

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. I agree strongly	3	11.11	0	0.00
2. I agree	5	18.52	5	18.52
3. I agree slightly	5	18.52	15	55.56
4. I disagree slightly	7	25.93	1	3.70
5. I disagree	7	25.93	4	14.81
6. I disagree strongly	0	0.00	2	7.41
Mean (SD)	3.370 (1.363)		3.370 (1.182)	

Table 6. Question 5 responses

(I believe my language learning success depends on what the teacher does in the class.)

	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1. I agree strongly	5	18.52	3	11.11
2. I agree	13	48.15	12	44.44
3. I agree slightly	7	29.93	10	37.04
4. I disagree slightly	2	7.41	1	3.70
5. I disagree	0	0.00	1	3.70
6. I disagree strongly	0	0.00	0	0.00
Mean (SD)	2.222 (0.847)		2.444 (0.892)	

Table 7. Students' reflections on collaborative language learning experience

Question	Response	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
1. Views on this collaborative experience	Presentation	23	3	0	26
	Autonomy	3	0	0	3
	Group learning	1	0	0	14
	Audience	1	1	4	6
2. Views on collaborative learning after this project in general	Topic variety	9	0	0	9
	Group learning	9	2	1	12
	Motivation and autonomy	5	0	0	5
	Audience	0	1	0	1
3. Student-centered vs. Teacher-led activities	Same or ambiguous	0	0	14	14
	Prefer Student-cen.	9	0	0	9
	Prefer teacher-led	7	0	0	7

Note: Students may mention more than one element in their responses.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that collaborative language learning activities allowing Japanese university EFL students to have input into their own curriculum not only made them aware that having their own choices can be helpful, but also significantly increased their view of the importance of what they were doing in the classroom. As Kimura, Nakata, and Okumura (2002) note, the classroom is the major source of input for EFL students, and classroom activities play a heavy role in their learning.

According to written explanations presented by students after the study, the words *interest* and *motivation* were used most frequently to show preferences toward *student input*. Students noted that if learning activities valued their own interests, they would be more motivated in their learning and have more fun in the classroom. When students are interested in the content of their study, it is easier for them to try and understand the material. One student commented that if students could have a hand in their own assignment selection, they would aim at different things. Another said that a university is where people should study what they are interested in.

From the comments spoken by these students, it may be assumed that they value their own interests, and that their motivation for studying is closely related to the amount of freedom of choice they have in their own learning. Furthermore, this coincides with assertions of the importance of self-worth of the students. The result of this study sheds some light on the query toward the widely used textbook-based way of teaching and learning in Japan (Iino & Shimizu, 1989). On the other hand, some students did not agree completely with this philosophy. They argued that they should also study things they may not necessarily be so interested in or good at.

Other students were at a loss of what to do if they were allowed to choose their own materials. These students argued that it was basically the teacher's responsibility to find teaching materials and that there should be a limit on what students are able to choose. In this study, the teacher-centered, textbook-based way of teaching was also used and combined with student-centered collaborative learning

activities. Nevertheless, specific comments from the students showed that some of them still have discouraging feelings toward choosing their own study materials by themselves. These answers show a conflict with the results of post-questionnaire Q1, where answers show no disagreement (see Table 2). This shows a discrepancy between multiple-choice, quantitative answers in favor of student autonomy and the open-ended qualitative reasons for their answers. According to the results, students don't think there is any problem when they are simply asked about choosing their own study materials. However, when asked more directly about their teacher, they also felt that the teacher did not have enough responsibility to offer recommendations as to what they should learn in the student-centered way of learning

Findings after the study was completed show that students tend to value learning inside the classroom more than studying outside of class, which was slightly different from what results had originally been expected before the study took place. It was assumed before conducting this study that students participating in such a collaborative autonomous activity would have more of a deeper understanding of the importance for studying outside of the classroom once the activity was over because of the need to spend time negotiating with other members in the same group. However, the results of this present study showed a higher score to Q2 in the pre-questionnaire than in the post-questionnaire (see Appendix A). The general assumption before conducting this research was to receive a higher score for Q2 in the post-questionnaire since engaging in such a collaborative learning activity would have required them to spend a fair amount of time with each other outside of the class.



To analyze the post-questionnaire results of Q2 regarding the importance of studying outside of the classroom where the students less valued in “outside of the class learning” after this activity was conducted, the students might compare studying inside of the class with their peers and studying outside the class with their peers. At the beginning of this activity, the students demanded that they have more time inside the class to prepare for their presentations. Since this demand was met, students spent more time preparing and choosing materials inside the class than outside of the class as originally planned by the researcher.

### Conclusion

The results of this study also suggest that although there was a trend for students to better appreciate having a hand in their own learning, they were not fully prepared to experience complete autonomous learning. Findings from this study shed some light on further investigation into how both a learner and a teacher can play their respective roles lively and effectively in the foreign language learning milieu in Japan.

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4. I disagree slightly.

5. I disagree.

6. I disagree strongly.

1. I believe that students should be given choices in the assignments they do for class. \_\_\_\_ Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. I believe my language learning success depends on what I do outside the classroom. \_\_\_\_ Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. I believe my language learning success depends on what I do in the classroom. \_\_\_\_ Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. I believe my language learning success depends on what my classmates do in the classroom. \_\_\_\_ Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. I believe my language learning success depends on what the teacher does in the classroom. \_\_\_\_ Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix A

### Pre- and post-questionnaire

I. For Questions 1 to 5, please evaluate each of the following statements and write the appropriate number. Please also provide reasons for your answer. Each number corresponds as follows:

1. I agree strongly.

2. I agree.

3. I agree slightly.

II. Have you ever experienced collaborative language learning? Yes\_\_ No\_\_

If yes, please explain your experience in Japanese.

If no, please describe your past language learning experience in Japanese.

3. In your experience, do you think you learn equally well, better, or less well in the student-centered collaborative activities than in traditional teacher-centered activities? Why?

### Appendix B

#### Reflections on collaborative language Learning experience

You are asked to write your honest thoughts in Japanese about what you have experienced as a collaborative language learner in this course and in general. This will be analyzed anonymously for research purposes only to better understand language learners' views on collaborative language learning.

1. What are your views regarding this specific collaborative experience? Write your feelings and reflections freely and openly about working with your classmates in your group and about being part of an audience for the other groups. You may compare and contrast this experience with your past language learning experience to explain your thoughts and feelings.
2. What are your views regarding collaborative learning in general after participating in this project?