Reintroducing *kumi*-type structures at university

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As it is thought that numerous educational advantages could be gained from Japanese foreign language students' continued identification with *kumi*- and *han*-type small group structures that are largely abandoned at the university level, a preliminary research study on students' beliefs concerning the use of such small group structures, both before and after university matriculation, was conducted with incoming university English majors. This paper begins by presenting background information on why groups are culturally and educationally relevant in Japan. After the results of the research are described and analyzed, the paper ends with a discussion of the conclusions and implications drawn from the study.

「組」と「班」の少人数グループの構成は、大学ではほとんど利用されていないようだが、日本人学生はこの構成に一体感を感じ、それが、教育的利点を生みだしているのではないという考えから、英語学科の新入生を対象に、大学入学前と後での小グループ構成に対する意見について予備研究を行った。本論文では、グループ活動が、日本では文化的にも教育的にも妥当である理由を背景知識として示し、研究結果を分析・考察し、最後に結論と教育的提案を述べている。

As discussed by Ryan (1995), many EFL (English as a foreign language) instructors in Japan favor teaching via foreign rather than domestic pedagogical practices. Such predilections, he claims, stem largely from presuppositions not entirely defendable, for instance, because foreign pedagogical practices, being "tried and true," trump domestic practices. However, it is doubtful that pedagogical methods can be chosen without consideration of several factors unique to FLL (foreign language learning) situations.

First, it is likely that most students in the typical Japanese university FLL classroom lack the experience of having lived abroad. As such, they would likely only be familiar with their own culture's modes of

appropriate behavior and expression and would therefore tend to rely on and utilize such behavior, even when in the FLL classroom.

Second, FLL is, by definition, conducted outside of target language usage spheres. The source culture, by default, surrounds the FLL classroom. Thus, no matter how strongly language instructors aim to have learners gain target behavioral patterns, learners are free to instantly revert back to modes of behavior congruent with the source culture the moment class is finished.

Third, because the source culture's behavioral modes dominate the behavior of learners a majority of the time, they may use those modes when engaged in learning in the FLL classroom. These modes may be used unconsciously or even willingly, as some learners' behavioral schemata present those modes as the only viable alternative for action and interaction. Finally, learners become used to learning in certain ways, which is particularly true for Japanese university students who matriculate to university. The Japanese, like any other group of language learners, are not "clean slates" when they advance to university (Long & Russell, 1999). They have been found to bring with them things like the English study methods they employed for university slot attainment (Rubrecht, 2005).

In short, a vast array of influences from source cultural behavioral norms pervade the university FLL classroom, many of which language instructors (either expatriate or native Japanese instructors) may be unaware or unable to counter. While this should not deter instructors from their central goal of having students learn aspects of the target language and culture, it may nevertheless be questioned whether or not source culture norms are suitable for FLL purposes. Considering the pervasiveness of these norms as described above, it may be speculated that some norms could be utilized to actually further learners' foreign language education endeavors.

This paper details research involving students' beliefs regarding the incorporation into Japanese university-level EFL courses of source culture patterns of learning, namely the use of *kumi*- and *han*-type small group structures. The current research means to show that these small group structures, which are commonly abandoned at the university level, are still identifiable to students, are deemed by students to be positive and effective in their learning, and thus may remain viable learning patterns in FLL courses at university in Japan.

Collectivism, interdependence, and group education

An understanding of why group structure use was selected as the pedagogical practice scrutinized in this study and why this aspect of source culture should not be dismissed in FLL situations can only come with an understanding of how collectivism, interdependence, and Japanese group education all cause the Japanese to favorably view groups and group learning.

The general world view that the Japanese subscribe to is that of *collectivism*, or the value system whereby one's identity and attitudes are regulated first and foremost by a consideration of the groups with which one associates (Littlewood, 2001). For collectivists, the norms, wishes, and overall preservation of the group influences and often

determines behavior. The literature on collectivism explains that the behavior and thought patterns of collectivists center on determining and acting in accordance with socially appropriate behavior and behavior modification based on the strong tethers of relationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). In actively seeking and receiving identity, support, and protection via group affiliation (Nishiyama, 2000), collectivists "focus on the achievement of group goals, by the group, for the purpose of group well-being, relationships, togetherness, the common good, and collective unity" (Triandis, 1995, p. 1).

For the collectivist, ingroups represent the foundation of both thought and action. Defined by Triandis (1988), ingroups are "groups of people about whose welfare one is concerned, with whom one is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to discomfort or even pain" (p. 75). As it is generally socially desirable for those in collectivistic cultures to not only seek out and make efforts to belong to ingroups but also to place group goals ahead of individual goals (Oetzel, 1998), a loss of identification of and participation in groups makes it difficult for collectivists to determine what constitutes proper behavior.

Additionally, the Japanese are socialized to see themselves as interdependent entities (Shimahara, 1979). *Interdependence* describes the self as it exists in relation to others. Those with an interdependent construal of the self find expressions and the experience of emotions and motives connected to and influenced by the reactions of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Because the interdependent self cannot be properly defined without social settings and the existence of others by which one can assess, determine, and fulfill societal obligations, such a self-construal plays a major role in the regulation of various psychological processes that necessarily includes others in the definition of the self. This is not to say that interdependent people lack personal agency or require others in order to function. Rather, others actively and continuously participate in the construction and defining of the interdependent self.

The fact that the Japanese may largely be considered a collectivistic and interdependent people does not come about by chance. As discussed by Ryan and Stiller (1991), education is one of the primary ways by which culture is transmitted. In the case of the Japanese, it is not only the many facets of culture but also morality that is taught to and absorbed by the nation's youth in the education system. This is because learning in Japan is considered to be a moral activity. By extension, schools are regarded as moral environments (White, 1987). Those enrolled in the national education system (generally but not exclusively at pre-tertiary education levels) are taught and actively engage in ways meant to develop within each generation behavior in line with traditional Confucian morals, which include social order, discipline, hard work, and a de-emphasizing of the self (Boocock, 1992; Dien, 1999; Hawkins, 1994; White, 1987). Confucian teachings about human relationships and virtues, themselves the underpinnings of collectivism and interdependence for many East Asian societies, have shaped modern Japanese pedagogical ideas about discipline and engagement, and it is precisely these ideas that have come to shape the Japanese educational and pedagogical practices that consequently fuel the schools (White, 1987; Wray, 1999).

The ways in which schools and classes are organized and run point specifically to this Confucian influence, as they indicate how the education system inculcates in students the morals valued by Japanese society as a whole. This inculcation is done via the formation and education by use of group structures known as *kumi* and *han*. *Kumi* are basically "grade-level permanent homerooms." All students are placed in *kumi* through secondary school, and nearly all student activities are done via some form of *kumi* participation.

Students are placed in these small groups within the education system because of the belief that both personal development and understanding of academic content is best achieved through shared group activities (Wray, 1999). *Kumi* are constructed without consideration of students' individual strengths or weaknesses, as that would be deemed discriminatory and would yield less-than-optimal moral benefits (Shimizu, 1998; Wray, 1999). *Kumi* are also peer-oriented and bound not by top-down authoritative structures but by equal horizontal ties (Carson, 1992).

Each *kumi* is divided into even smaller groups called *han*. It is the *han*, rather than the individual student, that is the smallest unit in the Japanese classroom (Sato, 1998). *Han* are constructed and employed so that classwork can take place. *Han*, similar to *kumi*, bring together students of different interests and abilities (Tsuchida & Lewis, 1999). These small group structures serve pedagogical and socializing functions (Carson, 1992), that is, as both a method of classroom management and as a means for students to understand and implement groupthink, respectively.

By means of *kumi* and *han* use over a span of many years beginning from elementary school, students are trained to work and think in groups, to seek and value harmony with others, and to evince displays of proper Japanese morality. Because all aspects of education are centered upon group learning, students come to find relevant rewards and personal satisfaction in their devotion to the group (Shimahara, 1979; White, 1987). Furthermore, they also experience an enormous amount of pressure to determine and act in accordance with what has been defined as the "cultural center" (McConnell, 1999) of the classroom.

As personal identities are hidden by the web of relationships developed in the classroom and by the specific roles students find themselves fulfilling in the Japanese education system (Sato, 1998), coupled with what has been discussed thus far about collectivism and interdependence, it is speculated that without groups to help define the self and regulate behavior in the classroom, students might experience difficulty determining appropriate modes of classroom behavior, the potential result being students placing more attention on determining appropriate modes of behavior instead of on the focus of each lesson. This does not happen at pre-tertiary education levels where *kumi* and *han* group structures are actively employed. However, such group structure use is all but abandoned at the university level in Japan. Possible reasons for why this abandonment occurs have been proffered (Rubrecht, in press a), as has been the notion that Japanese students, upon matriculation to the "world between worlds" that is university, may feel lost in learning without their familiar *kumi* and *han* groups (Rubrecht, in press b).

The research

Although a case can be made for implementing group-centered pedagogical practices based on the learning predilections of students due to their cultural and educational background, as explained above, there is also an abundance of literature suggesting how groups offer clear pedagogical advantages, including but not limited to increasing target language speaking time and negotiation of meaning (see Ford, 1991). Even so, student response and reaction to group structures cannot be ignored. Students' aversion to being placed in or considered part of *kumi* and *han* again at university would doom such structure use to failure.

As such, to ascertain students' beliefs concerning group structure use in educational settings (i.e., to see if students would be accepting of group structure learning at university, if they found such structures to be of benefit to their learning, etc.), the researcher requested the participation of incoming university freshmen English majors enrolled in two English classes (n = 48) at a private university in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The students possessed a minimum of high-intermediate English language ability, were a mix of returnee and non-returnee students, and had volunteered to participate in the one-semester-long study. The English classes, both called "English Skills 101" and officially described as a course meant to provide students with opportunities to explore and practice a range of English skills, convened for 90-minute sessions twice a week for 13 weeks.

In order to present students with activities and opportunities for learning both inside and outside of groups as a means of comparison, the courses were designed in the following manner. At the beginning of the spring semester, prior to their knowing much about their fellow classmates and the university environment, the students were told to consider their English Skills course as their *kumi* at university. Students were also told that they would be forming small groups (to be considered as *han*) of four to five students each. It was explained to them that this *han* construction was necessary, as part of their semester grade would be based upon their participation in and completion of several group activities. The group activities were a set of five group conversation logs to be conducted outside of class, a group video presentation (which students had to plan and execute as a group), and various in-class activities (e.g., class discussions, problem-solving tasks). These group activities were balanced by an ample number of in-class and homework activities done individually, including the reading and completing of handouts, learning and practicing course topics, and writing a research report.

It was fully understood (and explained to the students) that this being university, a genuine *kumi* could not really be constructed. In other words, because Japanese universities abandon *kumi* use, it was not really possible to think of the students' English Skills course as a *kumi* in the common educational sense of the word, particularly because the students had slightly different course schedules. However, it was explained that in order to take advantage of the students' experience in learning via group structures, the course could still be made to approximate a *kumi* (i.e., be *kumi*-like) if students considered the course as their *kumi*, or homeroom, with me as their *kumi* teacher. It was a simple matter for me to display *kumi* teacher-like qualities

(e.g., concern for students' progress) because I met with the students for lessons twice a week (more than any other course) and, similar to pre-tertiary level *kumi* teachers, I felt a genuinely strong sense of duty to aid students not only in their English language learning but also with any social or personal concerns that they might have had. This sense of duty was conveyed to the students by my stating to them that they were free to talk with me about any topic, academic or otherwise, and by my constantly encouraging them to visit my office any time for any reason.

In a similar fashion, *han*-like structures were created. Though not fully comparable to pre-tertiary *han*, they were constructed so that students would (a) work together in their small groups to accomplish tasks, (b) come to know well and relate better with their groupmates, especially via the conversation logs and group video presentations, and (c) accept in rotation the responsibility of being the *hanchō* (i.e., group leader), whose job it was to coordinate the conversation log discussions and report on the progress of their group's video presentation.

To understand the students' beliefs about group learning, they were presented with two questionnaires, both written in English. Questionnaire 1, administered during week one, contained a mixture of questions regarding students' educational background and learning experiences, views about learning in *kumi*- and *han*-type structures (including the perceived effectiveness of such structures in educational settings), and expectations on the amount of groupwork they would engage in at university. Questionnaire 2, administered during week thirteen, explored students' perceptions of the various individual- and group-oriented activities in which they had engaged that semester as well as their preferences regarding learning structures at university.

Results

As can be seen from Table 1, responses to Questionnaire 1 revealed that the students had come to university with diverse educational experiences and that they experienced a considerable amount of movement between different types of domestic and foreign schools. Collecting this information was deemed necessary because some students, particularly returnees, may never have attended schools where groups were the central classroom structure. Students without *kumi* or *han* experience would have been ineligible for inclusion in the research.

Table 1. Students' educational background

	Number of students	Mean time (years)
Students who had attended…		
…a Japanese school in Japan	45	9.2
…an international school in Japan	3	0.3
…a Japanese school abroad	9	0.9
…a local school abroad	28	1.9
Students who experienced *kumi*- and *han*-style learning at…		
…a Japanese school in Japan	47	9.3
…an international school in Japan	2	7.0
…a Japanese school abroad	6	4.3
…a local school abroad	16	3.9

The results show that all students had experience with Japanese *kumi*- and *han*-style learning at some point in their educational histories.

Students were also asked their overall opinions about *kumi*- and *han*-style learning (i.e., the degree to which they liked or disliked such learning) and the perceived effectiveness of learning via such group structures. Figures 1 and 2 present the students' response results.

As can be seen, a vast majority of students held positive views of such groups in educational situations as well as of their effectiveness for learning. The students explained their reasoning by responding to open-ended questions, with positive responses mainly being that such styles allow for the borrowing and sharing of textbooks and class materials and because they make bonds between the students stronger. One student even remarked that *kumi* allow students to "feel the sense of unitness." Such positive responses in support for such group learning styles were expected. Negative views were still acknowledged, including there being little or no chance to speak or interact with students in other *kumi* and too much time at school is spent with *kumi* and *han* members.

Positive views of the effectiveness of such structures were evinced by students remarking that they allow them to feel more comfortable, more easily share their opinions, learn from others, learn cooperation, learn how to fit into new circumstances, and increase their speaking time (in English classes). Additionally, it was pointed out that such structures aid teachers because they can better control students' behavior and monitor their progress. Negative views on the effectiveness of such structures focused largely on the fact

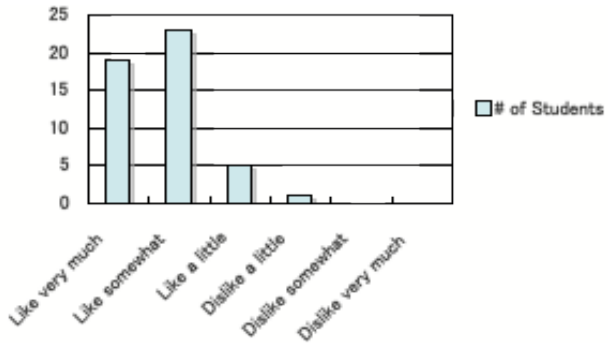

Figure 1. Students' opinions on *kumi*- and *han*-style learning

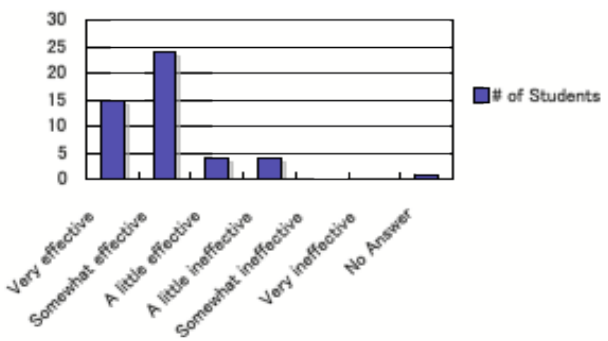

Figure 2. Students' opinions on the effectiveness of *kumi*- and *han*-style learning

that the groups are usually constructed without considering individual student skill level.

As the incoming freshmen had yet to experience learning at the university level, they were asked questions regarding their expectations for group use at university in terms of (a) the percentage of time groupwork is used in general and (b) the percentage of time groupwork is used specifically for English learning. Figures 3 and 4 detail their responses.

These results indicate that a vast majority of students believed modest group work would be used in general at university but that for English courses, groupwork would be used even more. It is unclear why the students thought this way, though it is speculated that it may be because of the inherent communicative nature of FLL.

Questionnaire 2 asked students to indicate via percentages how much they enjoyed their first semester English Skills activities, both as individuals and when in groups. They were also asked how effective those activities were for their learning. Figures 5 and 6 present these results.

A comparison of the figures indicates that there was very little difference between students' views concerning their enjoyment and the effectiveness for learning of the semester's individual and group activities. A vast majority of responses for each can be found in the top two percentage brackets in each figure, indicating highly positive views. It can therefore be said that most students in this sample believed that they not only learned much from the semester's activities, be they from individual or group work, but also that they found the learning experience pleasant.

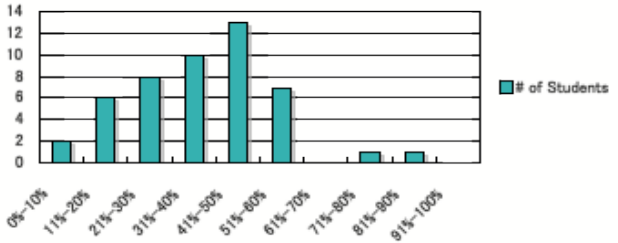

Figure 3. Students' expectations of general groupwork at university

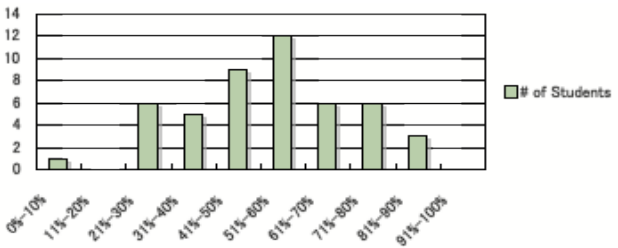

Figure 4. Students' expectations of groupwork for English learning at university

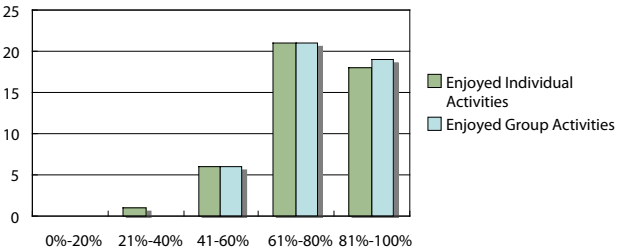

Figure 5. Students' enjoyment of group / individual activities

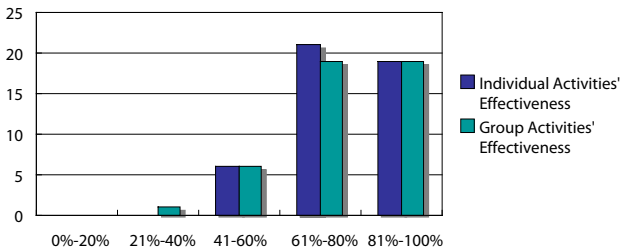

Figure 6. Students' beliefs of the effectiveness of group / individual activities

Space was also allotted on Questionnaire 2 for students to provide more specific feedback on the subject of enjoyable and effective activities. Table 2 shows the top three most highly rated activities cited by the students, with the number of student responses in parentheses.

Results of interest from Table 2 include that, as far as group activities were concerned, the group video presentation was not only by far the most enjoyable activity, but it was also considered to be the most effective for students' learning. Although the least enjoyable individual activity was the research report, students indicated via open-ended responses that the report was still a good way to learn and that it was nice that students could choose to research topics of personal interest. It must be noted, however, that the responses in Table 2 are simply rankings of feedback on the set activities students engaged in during the semester in their English Skills course. As such, the students were only comparing specific activities against themselves. Also, because some activities inherently required both individual and group work elements, some activities appear in both columns.

Table 2. Specific feedback on individual and group activities

	Individual activities	Group activities
Most enjoyable	•Conversation strategies (17)	•Group video project (36)
	•Pronunciation practice (13)	•Conversation logs (8)
	•Research report (6)	•Conversation strategies (2)
Least enjoyable	•Research report (16)	•Conversation logs (12)
	•Pronunciation practice (4)	•Classwork (2)
	•Reading/doing handouts (4)	•Group video project (2)
Most effective	•Pronunciation practice (15)	•Group video project (22)
	•Research report (12)	•Conversation logs (12)
	•Conversation strategies (10)	•Conversation strategies / summarizing practice (2)
Least effective	•Helpful expressions activities (7)	•Conversation logs (7)
	•Pronunciation practice (2)	•Helpful expressions activities (5)
	•Conversation strategies (2)	•Conversation strategies / pronunciation practice (1)

Finally, with one semester's worth of learning experience behind them, students were asked about their preferences for engaging in English learning activities at university. 40 students remarked that they preferred group learning while only 2 students preferred individual work (4 students claimed to enjoy both kinds equally). These responses can be interpreted as indicating that the students either wished to continue their *kumi* and *han*-style learning at university, that they found group learning conducive to their own individual

learning of course content, or both. In any case, the results indicate that, from the students' point of view, group use appears to be considered a favorable and highly acceptable means of learning and task engagement for them in English courses at university.

Conclusion and discussion

It has long been asserted that FLL is categorically different from the learning of traditional academic subjects like mathematics or science because of the learners' need to step out of their own culture and adopt patterns of thinking and behavior congruous with those of the target culture and language (e.g., Gardner & Smythe, 1975). While this consideration and acceptance of such behavioral patterns evinces FLL as being an intergroup phenomenon (Crookall & Oxford, 1988), as learners must enter into territory indicative of those who use the language and live the culture under study, this "crossing over" in no way diminishes the impact of language learning also being an intragroup phenomenon as well where source culture influences along with interpersonal dynamics among the learners each play a considerable role in shaping the language learning experience.

Based on the results of this preliminary research, it can be seen that the participants not only highly preferred group activities that were presented to them in forms reminiscent of the *kumi* and *han* structures with which they were familiar, but they also viewed them as being a highly effective and enjoyable means for their FLL endeavors. While the results were positive and indicate that instructors might consider similar or expanded use of such structures at the university level, there nevertheless remain two crucial points to consider.

First, it must be stressed that the results are indicative only of the present study's participants. Generalizations to students elsewhere cannot be made. Second, the results do not indicate that the utilization of group structures necessarily leads to improvement in language proficiency either in terms of course grades or of demonstrable linguistic proficiency. The current study was only meant to reveal students' beliefs on the subject of group learning in university EFL situations. As no control group was utilized, this research did not attempt to empirically test learning outcomes via individual versus group instructional methods. Nevertheless, because the results point to group structures being viewed favorably by the students and because the students have spent a majority of their lives learning in educational institutions in just such groups, such testing becomes the next logical step for future research.

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