

Let's try cooperative learning group projects!

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Group projects can be a bridge that connects English classrooms to the outside world. They can potentially provide students with many opportunities to interact, negotiate, and learn together. However, there may be some pitfalls, including the presence of free-riders, dominant students, and non-participants as well as excessive use of Japanese. Such problems occurring during the process of group work are often ignored if the end-product is satisfactory. In order to avoid these problems, I have developed "cooperative learning" group projects which I have implemented in my university English classes. These projects were constructed based on the principles of cooperative learning. Using a self-made project as an example, I will explain how to incorporate cooperative learning principles into project work. I will wrap up this paper with some tips for successful group projects.

グループプロジェクトは英語の教室の内と外を結ぶ架け橋となりうる。グループプロジェクトは学生に交流、交渉、共に学ぶ多くの機会を与えることができる。しかし、ただ乗り、支配的學生、非参加者、過度の日本語の使用など、陥りやすい問題点も存在する。プロジェクトの過程で起こりうるこのような問題は、最終作品が満足いくものであるとしばしば見逃されてしまう。このような問題を避けるために、私は協同学習の原理を取り入れたグループプロジェクトを立案し、実際に自分の大学の英語の授業で取り入れている。本稿では、私が実際に行ったグループプロジェクトを例として用いて、どのように協同学習の原理をグループプロジェクトに取り入れるかを説明する。また、グループプロジェクトを成功させるためのヒントを紹介する。

GROUP PROJECTS encourage language learning, language use, and content learning to occur simultaneously and thus can function as a bridge connecting English classrooms to the outside world. Group projects can provide students with many opportunities for producing comprehensible output, developing accuracy and fluency simultaneously, and communicating with each other (Beckett, 2002). Often-mentioned benefits include authenticity of experiences and language, intensity of students' motivation, involvement, engagement, participation and enjoyment, enhanced language skills, improved abilities to function in a group, increased content knowledge, improved attitudes (e.g., confidence, sense of self, self-esteem, attitude toward learning), increased self-directedness toward learning, and improved abilities in decision making, critical thinking, and problem solving (Stoller, 2006, p. 25).

However, there are pitfalls inherent in implementing project work, such as the presence of free-riders, dominant students and non-participants, and excessive use of Japanese. However,



if the end-product is satisfactory, any problems with the process are frequently overlooked. In addition, students often view project work negatively (Beckett, 2005; Eyring, 1989).

In order to avoid these problems, I have developed “cooperative learning” group projects. These projects were constructed based on the principles of cooperative learning (CL). CL is defined here as the “principles and techniques that involve small groups as an instructional means so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (Fushino, 2008).

There are various CL principles proposed by CL proponents. The projects to be introduced in this paper incorporated the following nine CL principles:

1. *Positive interdependence*: “[The] perception that you are linked with others in a way so that you cannot succeed unless they do (and vice versa)” (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 2002, p. 225).
2. *Individual accountability*: Each group member must fulfill his or her share of work so that the group can achieve its goal (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).
3. *(Face to face) promotive interaction*: Students are urged to help, encourage, and support group members in achieving each other’s goals as opposed to impeding others’ success (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).
4. *Small group skills*: Interpersonal and small group skills are essential in interacting effectively with other learners (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).
5. *Group processing*: This illustrates the importance of “reflecting on a group session to describe what member actions were helpful and unhelpful and make decisions about what actions to continue or change” (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 236).
6. *Heterogeneous grouping*: Groups should consist of a wide

variety of students so that they can learn how to deal with people who are different from themselves and thereby benefit from a variety of ideas and viewpoints (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002).

7. *Maximum peer interaction*: Both the number of students actively participating at any one moment and the amount of time students spend actively participating in an activity should be maximized (Kagan, 1994).
8. *Equal opportunity to participate*: Everyone should have an equal chance to participate in group work by speaking, writing, or performing (Kagan, 1994).
9. *Cooperation as a value*: Students should be encouraged “to see mutual assistance as a goal to strive for, to view others as potential collaborators, and to choose cooperation as often as possible as a viable alternative to competition and individual work” (Jacobs et al., 2002, p. 4).

My aim here is to show that if these principles are skillfully incorporated into project work, students’ learning and psychological health will be substantially enhanced. It is also expected that the problems inherent in project work will be avoided.

A sample CL group project

In this section, I will describe in detail a sample CL group project and explain how CL principles are incorporated into each step.

Overview of the Group Survey Project

The Group Survey Project is a semester-long group project in which students work in groups in order to investigate their classmates’ and foreigners’ views on certain aspects of intercultural communication through structured interviews and to deepen their cultural understanding. This project is designed

for advanced level, first-year, non-English major university students in Japan. These students are labeled as “advanced” based on a placement test consisting of reading and listening, which is often administered in Japanese universities. Therefore, this does not necessarily mean that these students are advanced in oral communication. This project was developed as a semester-long project to be conducted in a class where approximately 40 students meet twice a week for 90 minutes for 13 weeks. The project consists of three phases: Preparation, Class Survey, and Foreigner Survey.

The preparation phase

The aims of this phase are to create a collaborative atmosphere and to improve group work/ discussion skills. More specifically, tasks were developed to encourage students to discover and value cooperation, create a friendly, goal-oriented atmosphere in their groups and the class, and learn the language forms necessary for conducting group work effectively.

Class building activities

On the first day of class, students carry out two activities and fill out the “Readiness for L2 Group Work Questionnaire” (Fushino, 2008), which is later used for group formation. This questionnaire was designed to measure how ready students are to work in groups in terms of their L2 communication confidence and beliefs about L2 group work. The idea behind this questionnaire is that if low readiness students work with high readiness students, they will learn how to work effectively in group work. This will also increase heterogeneity in a group.

The first activity is *Find Someone Who...* Students walk around the classroom with a sheet on which various fun statements are written, find a partner, greet each other, and ask three questions, such as “Have you ever gotten lost on campus?” based on the

statements written on the *Find Someone Who...* sheet. This activity gives students a chance to talk with many classmates and allows them to feel included in the class.

The next activity is *Interview Each Other!* Students in pairs take turns interviewing their classmates and fill out a personal information sheet. Information such as the student’s home town, favorite food, favorite English expression, motto, or experience living abroad is exchanged. By sitting together and sharing personal information, students in pairs have a chance to feel close to each other.

Team building activities

As explained above, care is taken to create groups that are heterogeneous based on their degree of readiness for L2 group work (Fushino, 2008). Each group consists of four members, consisting of one high-readiness student, two middle-readiness students, and one low-readiness student. Returnees, if any, are spread out so that they do not belong to the same group. Students stay in the same group for the entire semester while completing the semester-long project.

- *Step 1.* Students in the same group move desks and chairs and sit together. If the classroom has long desks, only one desk is used by each group. This narrows the distance between group members as even students sitting diagonally can hear each other clearly. (CL principle addressed: face-to-face promotive interaction.)
- *Step 2.* Group members form two pairs and conduct *Paired Interviews*. They use the *Find Someone Who...* sheet used in the first lesson, but are encouraged to ask follow-up questions. Before the interview starts, the students are informed that they will introduce their partners to the other pair and that they must therefore listen carefully. Listening attentively is a basis for cooperation, and this activity can help

students not only feel close to each other, but also learn the importance of attentive listening. Upon completion of the interview, each pair member introduces his or her partner to the other pair. (CL principles addressed: maximum peer interaction, equal opportunity to participate, and cooperation as a value.)

- *Step 3.* Members give their group an attractive name. First, a small sheet of paper is provided, and students individually write as many candidate names as possible. Then, a large sheet of paper is circulated among the group, and members add names to the list, one at a time, from their own list. After circulating the sheet several times, they choose the best name. They also prepare to explain why they chose that particular name. (CL principle addressed: equal opportunity to participate.)
- *Step 4.* Groups make group name cards. Each group is provided with a blank index card and four differently-colored markers. Each student uses one color, and every participant is urged to contribute to creating the group name card. Using differently-colored markers makes everyone's contribution visible. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability and equal opportunity to participate.)
- *Step 5.* Groups take turns at introducing themselves to the class, showing the group name card and explaining the reason for the name. This activity promotes group solidarity and gives an opportunity for students to learn about other groups. (CL principle addressed: cooperation as a value.)
- *Step 6.* Group members decide who assumes which of the four group work roles: Group Work Coordinator, Materials Manager, English Supervisor, and Homework Manager. The Group Work Coordinator takes care of the group so that everyone in the group can work effectively and happily. The Materials Manager receives the group's set of materials and handouts from the teacher, distributes these

materials among group members, and collects and turns in all the materials. The English Supervisor encourages every member to interact in English by showing an "English, please!" card and by reporting on the use of English in the group to the teacher. The Homework Manager is responsible for making sure that everyone in the group does their homework. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability and positive interdependence.)

Lesson starter activities

At the beginning of each lesson, groups engage in lesson starter activities for five minutes. The purpose of these activities is to have group members feel closer and care for each other and to change from Japanese-speaking mode to English-speaking mode. Each group selects a note-taker of the day who checks attendance and then ask questions such as "How are you feeling today?" or "Did you do your homework?" which are written on a separate sheet of paper. Then, using a question written on another sheet of paper as a conversation starter, group members chat in English on a familiar topic such as favorite movies or vacation plans. (The idea of lesson starter activities originates with Johnson and Johnson's cooperative learning workshop at the University of Minnesota, which I attended in July 2005.)

Reflection at the end of each lesson

At the end of each lesson, students reflect on their lesson participation and evaluate the following five aspects on a 5-point Likert scale: lesson preparation, active group work participation, use of English, active listening, and no off-topic chatting. This rapid evaluation mode is employed because of limited class time.

Discussion language practice

First-year Japanese university students often lack the ability to state their opinions clearly or politely disagree. Even advanced students show the same tendency. In particular, they tend to avoid controversy and easily agree with someone's opinion without giving it much thought. However, in order to reach more appropriate solutions or elicit well-formed ideas, providing constructive criticism is essential. Therefore, politely disagreeing is emphasized in this phase.

- *Step 1.* A deck of opinion cards (e.g., "Soccer is more interesting than baseball") is placed in the center of each group's desk. Around the opinion cards are six expression cards with weak, medium, and strong forms of agreement and disagreement.
- *Step 2.* The first student picks up an opinion card and states its content as if it were the student's own opinion. The second student politely disagrees with the opinion, looking at the expression card stating his or her preference. The third student can then agree or disagree with the first two students. The fourth student checks the discussion language used.
- *Step 3.* Students rotate these roles. As they become familiar with the language, they give reasons and elaborate their opinions. Once the students feel comfortable expressing their opinions, they have a real group discussion on one of the topics written on each card.
- *Step 4.* Students engage in a free group discussion.

Cooperative functions practice

Working collaboratively in a second-language (L2) in small groups requires knowledge of cooperative expressions used in: facilitating, praising, encouraging, questioning, challenging, and

summarizing (Jacobs et al., 2002). This is because for students to effectively facilitate group work, they need to praise others' efforts and contributions, encourage quiet group members to participate, ask questions to clarify or confirm statements, challenge group members to formulate deeper and better thought-out ideas, and summarize their discussions. All of these functions require specific expressions, and without learning these expressions, it is difficult to cooperate in the L2.

- *Step 1.* A list of expressions corresponding to the above six functions is distributed to the students.
- *Step 2.* Group members practice these functions one at a time while engaging in an actual discussion on a familiar topic. Only one sheet stating the discussion topic (see Appendix) is provided to each group in order to ensure resource interdependence. Students receive three chips, and every time they use one of their preferred function-related expressions, they place a chip on the desk. They are encouraged to have used all their chips by the end of the discussion. If one student has used up all of his or her chips, that student has to wait to speak again until all the other members have also used up all of their chips. When everyone finishes using their chips, they receive the chips back and use them again. (CL principle addressed: equal opportunity to participate.)
- *Step 3.* Once students have become familiar with all of the function-related expressions, they are encouraged to use these expressions while engaging in a group discussion.

The Class Survey Phase

The goal of the Class Survey Phase is to investigate what classmates think about certain aspects of intercultural communication. An instruction booklet is distributed to help students understand what they will do in this project. The Foreigner Sur-

vey Phase, which follows this phase, is also briefly mentioned to inform the students of what follows. The first stage of the Class Survey Phase is to accumulate content knowledge of intercultural communication in order to select a topic to investigate. This stage overlaps with the latter stages of the Preparation Phase because of time constraints. While students are learning how to work effectively in groups, they start reading the textbook (Kajiura & Goodmacher, 2005) in order to accumulate sufficient intercultural knowledge to select their own research topic at a later stage. This phase consists of ten stages.

Stage 1: Jigsaw-reading of 12 passages

Each group member reads for homework a passage that is different from that assigned to other group members. Because each group consists of four members, four passages are read in each group in total. In the next class, those who have read the same passage get together and help each other better understand the contents of the passage so that they can explain the content to their home group members. About 30 minutes later, the students go back to their home groups and explain their own passage to their group. This is repeated three times so students gain knowledge of 12 intercultural topics in total. (CL principles addressed: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal opportunity to participate, and maximum peer interaction.)

Stage 2: Selecting the topic to investigate

Group members discuss and choose a topic (e.g., “interpersonal proximity”) to investigate. They also select a subtopic such as “physical space” in order to make their research manageable. Then, they convert the subtopic to a research question, like “How much space do people keep when they talk?” (CL principle addressed: positive interdependence and promotive interaction.)

Stage 3: Creating interview questions

Members create eight interview questions in order to answer the research question. First, members individually brainstorm questions and jot them down. Next, they circulate a larger sheet of paper and copy one question at a time from their list. This is repeated several times. Then, they discuss and select the most appropriate eight questions, check them for grammar, and finally sequence them. The teacher then collects the questions and checks their relevance, grammar, and logical order. When the questions are returned to each group, group members revise and reorder the questions based on the teacher’s suggestions. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability and equal opportunity to participate.)

Stage 4: Preparing the interview sheet

Each group member prepares an interview sheet to be used at the class interview stage. On each sheet, the group member writes all of the eight questions. The interview sheet is designed so that each member can interview six students and write their responses, and thus as a group, a relatively high total of 24 students can be interviewed. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability.)

Stage 5: Interviewing classmates

Each student uses the interview sheet and interviews six classmates so that each group interviews 24 students in total. During the interviews, students interact in pairs, and this dramatically increases peer interaction. (CL principles addressed: equal opportunity to participate and maximum peer interaction.)

Stage 6: Tallying the results

After the interview session, each group member is put in charge of two questions, and each takes turns asking the other members to report their findings orally, tallying the results, and filling out a result sheet. Group members then help each other calculate percentages if the question is closed-ended and categorize responses if the question is open-ended. When a student is experiencing difficulties in categorizing responses, the other members are encouraged to help him or her. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability, positive interdependence, promotive interaction, and equal opportunity to participate.)

Stage 7: Analyzing data and drawing a conclusion

When tallying is completed, members analyze and interpret the data. First, this is done individually, but whenever difficulties arise, members are expected to help each other. Then each member writes an analysis for each question on the result sheets. Upon completion, members start on the summary sheets. Four identical forms are circulated simultaneously, and each time a student receives a sheet, he or she writes the summary of the results he or she is in charge of, which enables all of the group members to have the same content when the process is completed. By looking at the summary sheets, group members check the accuracy of each other's analysis, interpret the results, and draw conclusions jointly. Finally, based on the discussion, they cooperatively write a conclusion that answers the research question. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability, equal opportunity to participate, positive interdependence, and promotive interaction.)

Stage 8: Preparing group presentations

The presentation is divided into five sections: Introduction, Questions and Method, Results, Conclusion, and Closing

(Reflection). Each member is responsible for presenting the section he or she is in charge of and one of the four other sections. Members make visuals of their sections on an overhead Camera (OHC), write presentation drafts, and practice the presentation. They are encouraged to read each other's drafts and to provide feedback. Practicing the presentation outside of class is strongly recommended. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability, positive interdependence, equal opportunity to participate, and promotive interaction.)

Stage 9: Group presentations

Each group gives an eight-minute group presentation using an OHC. Members of each group present their own section. While one member is speaking, the other members place relevant visuals on the OHC, and if the speaker stumbles, they help their teammate. Listeners take notes on half of the presentations and fill out feedback sheets for the other half. The feedback sheets are later given to the presenter groups. (CL principles addressed: individual accountability, positive interdependence, and equal opportunity to participate.)

Stage 10: Reflection

Two worksheets for reflection are prepared: the Group Work Improvement Plan Sheet and the Successful Group Work Sheet.

- *Group Work Improvement Plan Sheet.* Students individually fill out this sheet, which contains questions about other groups' presentations (e.g., good/bad points), their own group's performance (e.g., preparation and presentation), and action plans to improve their group work, as homework. In the next class, group members have a discussion regarding the above three points based on their individual perceptions. After the group discussion, two members visit another group, listen to the group's ideas, and report the

newly obtained ideas to their original group members.

- *Successful Group Work Sheet.* Students in each group discuss the purpose of group work, good and bad behaviors in group work, and useful skills for effective group work conducted in English. The results are shared with the class by one student from each group reporting that group's discussion to the class. This stage involves interaction with other groups and the class as a whole. This reminds students that they are not only members of their group but part of the class, and thus promotes class cohesion.

The foreigner survey phase

The purpose of this phase is to give students confidence in communicating with English-speaking foreigners (including non-native English speakers) while taking the initiative to interact, to recycle the skills and knowledge learned during the Class Survey Phase, to give students chances to exert more autonomy in their learning, and to challenge them with more cognitively difficult tasks. An instruction booklet is provided for this phase.

The flow of this phase is very similar to the Class Survey Phase, so only the additional phases will be described.

1. Students search for information on the Internet to help them interpret the results.
2. Students tailor the questions to foreigners. They also revise the questions that have been found unsuitable for their research.
3. Recommended interview sites and ways to avoid foreseeable risks are made explicit. This project is part of school work, so the teacher is responsible for the students' safety making it necessary to provide safety instruction. Therefore, providing safety instruction is necessary even though the students are not children. Members of each group discuss appropriate behaviors when talking to foreigners,

proper ways of introducing themselves, and actions to take if foreigners decline to participate in interviews. They also role-play the flow of the interview. Positive interdependence is promoted because the success of the interview depends on how effectively group members cooperate.

4. Students interview the foreigners off campus.
5. Students not only analyze the newly obtained data but also compare them with the results of the class survey.
6. Students give longer and more sophisticated presentations with PowerPoint slides.
7. Students write a group research paper. The paper is split into five sections so that each member contributes roughly the same amount of work. The introduction, questions and method, conclusion, and reflection sections are each written by a different group member while each member writes the result and analysis section for two questions. Although members write the section they are in charge of individually, they are encouraged to read each other's section in order to improve the overall quality of the group paper. This stage emphasizes individual accountability, equal opportunity to participate, and positive interdependence.

For the repeated stages, detailed instructions are unnecessary as students are already familiar with the tasks. Students themselves manage time, plan group work, and decide what percentage of the time they are going to use English. They are encouraged to use English for roughly 60% to 80% of group work. The teacher's role is to monitor group work, remind students to use cooperative expressions, and help them when they cannot solve problems on their own.

Students' reactions

I have implemented this survey project several times in my cultural understanding course, which (at the time) was a required

English course for first-year students at my university. I summarized the students' reflections on the project, and a detailed report is provided in Fushino (2009). Therefore, I will present here only the results related to the drawbacks of project work mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

The most remarkable finding is that 35 students (94.5%, $n = 37$, excluding three students who did not write any comments) viewed this project positively. This shows a sharp contrast with the negative views presented by Beckett (2002) and Eyring (1989). For example, Beckett reported that some students were frustrated with having fewer opportunities for direct instruction by the teacher and a reduced use of textbooks, and thus perceived less language development. The attendance rate of 98% also indicates student satisfaction with this class because students at this university can choose to stop attending a class and to take a credit approval test instead if they decide the class is not worth attending. This is dissimilar to the low course completion rate reported by Moulton and Holmes (2000).

Free-riders, dominant students, and non-participants were not observed either. Thirty-five students (87.5%, $N = 40$) felt that group members participated in group work in equal measure, and no student pointed out extreme imbalances in workload among group members. In addition, none of the students complained about a lack of traditional, teacher-led instruction. Furthermore, students claimed that they used English during 51% of group work time. Considering that the students were all Japanese sharing the same L1, they were not fluent in oral communication (although their reading skill, grammar knowledge, and vocabulary were quite good), and interaction in this group project was unstructured and complex, this percentage can be considered quite high. In conclusion, it is fair to claim that any problems inherent in project work were overcome by incorporating CL principles.

Useful tips for creating cooperative learning group projects

To conclude this paper, I would like to suggest useful tips for creating cooperative group projects.

1. Create a cooperative atmosphere among group members and in class. Let students get to know each other well.
2. Make heterogeneous groups.
3. Teach group work skills before having students work on a project. Teach necessary English expressions that will enable students to work effectively in groups.
4. Have group members exchange email addresses or phone numbers.
5. Plan a challenging but manageable project.
6. Set a clear goal that students can reach only if they cooperate.
7. Present how the project will proceed. Give an overview of the project at the beginning.
8. Define steps clearly.
9. Divide work (where appropriate) to promote individual accountability and equal opportunity to participate.
10. Assign each group member a role such as English Supervisor, Group Work Coordinator, Materials Manager, and Homework Manager.
11. Give individual tasks (preparation) before group tasks.
12. Provide only one worksheet for group work.
13. Provide time for reflection.
14. Be patient! Groups need time to mature.

Bio data

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Appendix

A sample discussion questions topic sheet

Small Group Discussion Topics-I

- Group Name: _____
- Note Taker: _____
- Time Keeper: _____

★ Let's focus on the following cooperative group functions. Look at your function card and practice the expressions whenever possible.

- Name: _____: Participant + Facilitating
- Name: _____: Note taker + Participant + Praising
- Name: _____: Participant + Encouraging
- Name: _____: Participant + Questioning

- Name: _____: Participant + Check your group members' use of the expressions

Rule: Use a talking chip every time you say your function words.

1. One of your professors has a guest (a middle-aged woman) from Boston. She's staying at the Sunshine Prince Hotel (Ikebukuro). The professor is too busy to show his guest around town, so he asked your group to take her somewhere. Please decide the following:
 - What day and what time to meet:
 - Where to meet:
 - Where to go:
 - What to do there:
 - What to eat there:
 - Others things to decide:
- ★ If your group is satisfied with the plan, work on No. 2.
2. Your group has invited an Indian student to have dinner together at one of your group members' place. Make a detailed plan.
 - When and what time:
 - Whose place:
 - What to cook:
 - What do you need (shopping list):
 - Who brings what:
 - Other things to decide: