

# Researching Out-of-Class Activities for Group Work

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With the spread of content-based and EAP programs either simulating western education or preparing students for study abroad, L2 group work has increased within Japan. The increase of such assignments has created a need to investigate L2 project work in the Japanese context. A qualitative investigation through observations, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and analysis of course documents was conducted into the out-of-class group work in an English-medium EAP class. The objective of the study was to identify the challenges students faced in out-of-class project work, the autonomous strategies used to overcome those challenges, and the additional support deemed necessary. The findings could inform curriculum choices for programs designed to prepare students for academic success in study abroad contexts.

欧米式教育を促進し海外留学準備としても有用な、内容重視型言語教育や学術英語プログラムが、日本の英語教育現場において普及している。その中で、欧米型グループワークを課する機会も増加しているが、日本でこの欧米式教授法が成功していくためには、グループワークを行う上での学習者のニーズを把握する必要がある。本稿では、大学の学術英語クラスで課されたグループワークに関して行った質的調査の結果を報告する。本研究では、観察・インタビュー・アンケート・学習者の提出物の分析を通して、学習者らがグループで授業外課題に取り組む中で直面した問題は何か特定し、その問題を乗り越えるために学習者らはどのような自律的方略を用いたか、また、グループワークを課す際にどのようなサポートが必要であるかを分析した。分析によって得られた結果は、海外留学で成功できる学習者を育成するため、今後のカリキュラム決定において有益となりうるものであった。

**T**HE INTERNATIONALIZATION of university education in Japan has led to an increase in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) curricula and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses based on western academic conventions. According to Miichi (2010), over 190 universities offered English-medium content courses as early as 2008. More recently, the Japanese government has also contributed to this movement through their Project for Promotion of Global Human Resources Development 2012, in which 11 universities were selected for university-wide CLIL curriculum development, and an additional 31 institutions were provided with funds to create faculty-specific CLIL programs (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2012). The goal of this government initiative was to prepare students to be competitive in the global marketplace, in terms of both educational and employment opportunities. Rightly or wrongly, these programs with English as the medium of instruction are designed to familiarize students with western academic conventions. A high proficiency of English along with an understanding of western academic conventions



is seen as necessary for students to successfully continue their education abroad or to secure membership in the international business and science communities. Thus, there is a clear need for research that can inform the curricula of CLIL and EAP programs that are aimed at preparing students for educational opportunities abroad.

Preparing students for academic success abroad will therefore need to incorporate the types of group and project work commonplace in many western institutions. With the spread of programs either simulating western education or preparing students for study abroad, project work in L2 contexts, such as group research papers and presentations, has increased in Japan. This increase creates a need to understand the challenges faced by students in such endeavors. The structure and contents of research papers and academic presentations are fairly standardized within the western academic context as demonstrated by the numerous textbooks on the topics. However, such assignments require a substantial amount of student out-of-class interaction, such as conducting joint research, peer editing, consensus building, and presentation planning. All these autonomous activities done without teacher support and supervision need to be investigated. A supportive framework for project work can be designed by identifying the specific challenges faced in out-of-class work, the strategies used to overcome these challenges, and the areas where additional support could be provided.

### Literature on Group Work and Gaps in the Research

Research in the out-of-class group work involved in preparation for presentations (Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000; Yang, 2010; Zappa-Hollman, 2007) have yielded some valuable insights. Kobayashi's (2003) study identified the out-of-class activities of Japanese students in an ESL program in Canada. The activities

included negotiation of task definition and teacher expectations, collaborative dialogue and rehearsing, and performance coaching, all of which were done outside class and without teacher supervision or support. The studies by Zappa-Hollman (2007) and Morita (2000) investigated the language socialization that occurs between native and nonnative speakers in study abroad group work contexts and the language that is necessary to become a member of an academic community. However, these studies focused on graduate level students already studying abroad in English-medium institutions, creating issues of the applicability to the context of group work of undergraduate students in their home country. Tuan and Neomy (2007) conducted a study of pretask preparation by Vietnamese students in an EFL program in their home country, but the teaching context was not one of instruction of western academic norms. None of the previously conducted studies investigated the challenges of ESL students in intensive English-medium EAP or CLIL courses specifically meant to prepare students for study abroad. Furthermore, although several studies have focused on the challenges faced by students in group work and the coping strategies employed, none have reported the students' perceptions about what additional support they felt was necessary. Specifically, the additional support students felt they required for both the successful completion of the project and the attainment of the larger language goals of enculturation into western academic conventions has not been investigated. To effectively prepare students for group projects in English-medium institutions, the challenges of group work, the strategies employed by students during out-of-class interaction, and the additional support they feel is necessary need to be clearly identified. This study fills the gap in the previous research on group work in two respects: (a) a focus on learners in a content-themed EAP course in their home country specifically designed to prepare students for study abroad, and (b) an investigation of the specific areas of need as identified by the learners.

## Research Questions

The research questions this study sought to answer are as follows.

1. Identify the challenges students faced in out-of-class work for completion of a research paper or presentation project.
2. Identify the study and language learning strategies used by students to overcome these challenges.
3. Identify the additional teacher support deemed necessary by students to successfully complete project work.

## Participants and Teaching Context

The participants in this study were members of a class of 14 advanced 2nd-year students in the Global Citizenship Program (GCP) at a university located in Tokyo, Japan. The GCP is a bilingual honors program for the top students who are interested in professional and academic careers in international contexts. Students are selected from all eight faculties and follow a special GCP curriculum in addition to the required courses for their respective majors. The first 2 years of the program consist of four semesters of an academic foundations and test preparation course and an international policy-themed EAP course, along with research and global issues seminars in Japanese.

The course project for which the out-of-class interaction was investigated was assigned in the international policy-themed EAP course. The assignment was a 15-page research paper and 20-minute PowerPoint presentation on the findings. Students were required to compare the foreign policy of two countries using the principles of International Relations Theory (dominance, reciprocity, and identity). Students worked in pairs and were free to divide the responsibilities of research, writing, creation of PowerPoint slides, and presentation preparation as they saw fit. Work on the assignment started in earnest at the midpoint of the

semester, giving the students 8 weeks to complete the research paper and presentation.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Observations of students' group work in a study lounge and in class, course documents, a questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The study skills and strategies that students would employ in their out-of-class group work were first identified through analysis of the GCP curriculum and course documents. This analysis was then used to create a general checklist for observations of out-of-class work. The compiled list allowed for the observation of specific study strategies in use, while looking for other strategies not explicitly taught in the GCP curriculum.

Next, 4.5 hours of observations were conducted, 3 hours of out-of-class student interaction in the GCP study lounge, and 1.5 hours of their final in-class presentations. The two 90-minute observation sessions of the GCP study lounge were conducted in the 2 weeks prior to the deadline for the final project to maximize the likelihood of students being engaged in pair work for the final project. The GCP study lounge provided an ideal location for the observations, as it was an area dedicated solely to students on the program and thus used by all members of the GCP as their primary area for out-of-class study and meetings. The observations provided an opportunity to see study strategies in use, confirm the use of various explicitly taught study strategies, infer potential challenges created by the strategies being employed, and ultimately inform the generation of questions to be used for the interviews.

After analysis of the observation data, a set of interview questions was generated. Three students were selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The students were selected with consideration to interest in participating in the study and avail-

ability. All participants were asked the same set of questions with a few additional follow-up questions added when necessary. The interviews were all audio-recorded and then coded for the relevant themes and topics.

Finally, a voluntary questionnaire containing the same questions as the interviews was emailed to the remaining members of the class. Of the remaining 11 students, eight responded to the questionnaire. The responses from the questionnaire were coded and analyzed in a manner consistent with the analysis of interview data. The information from the course documents, observations, interviews, and questionnaire allowed for a triangulation of the data to strengthen the validity of the findings.

### Findings: Interview and Questionnaire Data

The majority of the data were derived from the in-depth interviews as they provided richer descriptions of the challenges, strategy use, and desired additional support. The data from the questionnaires were then analyzed to see if the themes that emerged from the interviews were common to the class or specific to the student.

### Out-of-Class Group Work Challenges

The challenges identified in the interviews can be categorized into two distinct areas: challenges of time management and teamwork issues. These two challenges were also found to be the primary areas of difficulty identified by students who answered the questionnaire.

The most commonly mentioned challenge was that of finding the necessary time to complete the requirements of the assignment. The views of the three interviewed students (Figure 1) concerning this issue were echoed in all the questionnaires.

(Hazuki)

**IE:** Actually, last year we did together in Professor Stan's class, so we could do smoothly, the pair work. So this time the most challenging thing was to find time we can share, because we had a presentation of seminar on the same day as EAP's presentation.

...

So for me, the most challenging thing was finding time.

(Takashi)

**IE:** No, we were bad at time management because we crammed the whole work the day before we were supposed to hand in the drafts. For every draft—first draft, second draft, third draft, and final draft . . . It was difficult to control the time strictly because we were loose.

(Yuki)

**IE:** Time management was difficult. Especially before the presentation both of us returned to our hometowns so we had no time to work together. So it was hard. But also we had so many things to do.

...

**IE:** Actually, we once stayed up all night to finish the assignment. We barely finished.

Figure 1. Views of three interviewed students concerning time management. IE = interviewee.

The interviewees identified the primary challenge as time management. This was mainly due to the amount of coursework associated with being a member of the Global Citizenship Program. In the interview, students stated that multiple major assignments were due, often with overlapping deadlines. They

also had to balance the workload from their intensive English-medium classes with the requirements of the classes for their major. The amount of homework required for the GCP, indicated by the students to be 4 hours per night, created the added problem of finding time when both partners were available to meet for pair work. The specific issues concerning time management were classified as follows:

- heavy workload for GCP students from other courses,
- time to meet with partner and coordinating schedules, and
- setting of clear tasks and deadlines for self and for meetings with partner.

Another problem identified in the interviews was issues with teamwork. The issues naturally differed between groups, but the variety of problems shed light on the numerous challenges faced during pair work. Two specific issues are illustrated in the excerpts in Figure 2.

(Takashi)

**IR:** What were the biggest challenges for your group work?

**IE:** For example, when we had a meeting at my house, he tended to fall asleep soon. So after all, I did my work and he slept. So it was not . . . no meaning of gathering at my place.

**IE:** Hiroto and I were close, too close, so there's no tension between us. Like we have to . . . we should not sleep or . . . we should not . . .

**IR:** You're *too* comfortable?

**IE:** Yeah comfortable, close. Yeah, it was kind of difficult part to . . . yeah.

(Yuki)

**IE:** For our group, ideas about child labor (assignment topic) are different. Hazuki has learned about human rights issues a lot and she is really negative about child labor. She said child labor should be eradicated, definitely. But I thought it is impossible because there are many people struggling to get out of poverty so they have to send their children to work. So I thought her attitude was so . . .

**IR:** Black and white?

**IE:** Yes, yes. But I thought grey is also okay. So I thought at the end of the paper we faced . . . I realized a different idea about child labor issue and . . . But I took Hazuki's idea.

**IR:** So you gave in to your partner's viewpoint.

**IE:** Yes.

**IR:** Why did you change your thinking?

**IE:** Firstly, I don't like arguing. And she . . . her statement was so clear. And I thought my thinking was not found . . . I don't know how to say. I thought I'm still thinking and I have not reached the conclusion so I'm still on the way to reach the conclusion, so I took her side.

Figure 2. Views of two interviewed students concerning teamwork. IE = interviewee; IR = interviewer.

Key themes of comfort level and representation are illustrated. Although some might consider familiarity to have a positive influence on pair work, Takashi's experience clearly indicates that the opposite can be true. Familiarity can create a level of comfort in which partners believe "all will be forgiven between friends," leading to a lax attitude toward the assignment. Yuki's case brings to light another challenge with group work, namely the equal representation of ideas. This is a particularly difficult challenge to overcome, as by evaluating the final product,

the teacher can never know if the group members' ideas are expressed equally. Often, as in this case, a dominant partner's views will be disproportionately reflected in the final product. Other key teamwork issues identified during the interviews include the following:

- conflicts arising from differing studying styles,
- problems arising from the comfort level between partners,
- conflicts arising from noncompletion of tasks or scheduling issues,
- difficulty of discussing differing opinions and creating a consensus on issues, and
- need to make sure the views of both partners are reflected in the final product.

### Strategy Use

There were different strategies employed to deal with the various challenges of the project. The strategy use can be divided into strategies used to address the problems that arose from time management, teamwork, and the assignment.

As time management was a challenge common to all participants, so too were the strategies used to make more efficient use of limited time or to overcome the inability to meet in person. Although the participants stated that they were not particularly skilled at managing their time, this was not due to absence of effective time management strategies, but more due to the amount of work required in the GCP. The workload for the program is quite heavy with 6 hours of English-medium instruction. Students received between 8 to 10 hours of homework for the 2 courses. In addition to their English-medium GCP courses, the students also had to take Japanese seminars on research methodology and global issues along with the courses for their respective majors. The interviews uncovered that strategies

implemented for prioritizing tasks and making efficient use of limited time were varied:

- making a weekly schedule for all classes and responsibilities through a daily planner or Excel spreadsheet,
- scheduling specific tasks and deadlines prior to the next meeting, and
- scheduling regular weekly meeting days and times.

Related to the practice of effective time management was the widespread use of various technologies to remain connected to and working together with their partners, even when physically separated. Two representative examples were in the resolution of a study-style issue between Takashi and Hiroto and the simultaneous use of multiple technologies by Yuki (see Figure 3).

First, Takashi and his partner both preferred to work alone and also did not have much success working together when they met. Therefore, they used technology designed for social networking as a means to share their completed work without actually physically working together. In the second excerpt, Yuki tells of her use of a variety of technologies such as the Google search engine, Google Documents, and Skype, all in conjunction with regular communication with her partner by mobile phone and email.

The use of technology to varying degrees was a common theme in questionnaires, ranging from basic mobile phones to multiple technologies, including social media. A related theme was the adaption of applications originally meant for social interaction, such as Facebook, LINE, and Skype, for academic use. Students used the real-time connectivity afforded by the applications to schedule meetings, provide feedback and corrections, exchange ideas on content, and work together but remotely on the research paper. This likely stemmed from the fact that students were always connected through applications

on their mobile phones and the apps were already in constant use for social purposes. It was then easy for the students to use this existing connectivity for academic purposes. Other uses of technology were Google Docs to peer edit shared documents and the Google browser to look up accurate uses of key phrases.

(Takashi)

**IR:** Sometimes it's more difficult working with friends. So how did you two overcome this situation?

**IE:** Maybe, but we didn't have a conversation. So I did my part and I had him do his part. So divide the role clearly. And we focused on the individual work rather than group work. And communicate with a phone, like LINE or Facebook.

**IR:** Uh-huh.

**IE:** So, our group work was on Facebook for the most part. So we didn't overcome, but we changed the way to work together.

(Yuki)

**IE:** We talked on Skype. And then we also used spreadsheet of Google Docs and shared some information there.

**IR:** How often did you Skype?

**IE:** Twice a week maybe. And sometime when I want some advice from her while I'm writing, if she's online, I talked with her.

...

**IE:** I Googled the phrase I want to use and to see how the words are used by native speakers.

Figure 3. Views of two interviewed students concerning use of technology to work together. IE = interviewee; IR = interviewer.

### Desired Additional Support

Although courses are ideally designed to offer a sufficient amount of support and guidance to students, even the most insightful teachers cannot anticipate all the challenges that students will face in completing a major project. The students identified several areas in which they deemed that additional support or information was necessary. One specific request for additional information shared by two interviewees dealt with the assignment (see Figure 4).

(Hazuki)

**IR:** Any additional support that you would have liked?

**IE:** But, I think this is about Professor Smith's class maybe. Uhhh, I think Professor Smith's didn't explain much about the analyze.

**IR:** How to analyze using the International Relations theory?

**IE:** Yeah, and what kind of things that Professor Smith wanted us to do. So, it's little bit difficult. So during the presentation preparation and research paper writing, (I wondered) is it okay really or like that. I just talked with Yuki.

**IR:** Oh, so the about the contents of the research paper. What he wanted you to do?

**IE:** これでも本当にいいのかな? [Is what we are doing really ok?]

(Takashi)

**IE:** More information and more evaluation criteria. And some examples. And the reason why, the teacher's purpose or teacher's reason why he chose this requirement.

**IR:** The objective for the assignment?

**IE:** Yes, the objective for the assignment. Without that we cannot understand what the teacher really wants from us.

Figure 4. Views of two interviewed students concerning additional support. IE = interviewee; IR = interviewer.

The students felt that although the teacher provided a hand-out with a description of the assignment, the complexity of the project created the need for additional clarification. Hazuki stated that she would have liked more opportunities to communicate with the teacher on whether their research topic met the requirements of the assignment. There was a level of uncertainty that she felt throughout the process. Takashi echoed a similar view and added that he would have liked to know the specific grading criteria for the project, as it would have guided him in completing the assignment. He further stated that it would have helped if the teacher clearly indicated the learning goals of the project.

Upon receiving these comments, researchers re-examined course documents pertaining to the project. This review revealed that the requirements for the research paper and presentation were adequately described. Informal secondary interviews with the participants were then conducted to allow them to further clarify their comments on desired additional support. The issues centered on confirming the accuracy of the students' own analyses of their selected countries' foreign policy using the prescribed theory and whether the depth of the analyses was sufficient for a high grade. All three students indicated that they were motivated to get the highest possible grade for the course and thus desired class time to periodically confirm their work and ask if further research was required for an A grade. The students were not interested in clarification of the minimum requirements of the project, but wanted time to confirm the quality of their work and the specific details of the scoring rubric.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The most common challenge and strategy use centered on time management. This was due to the heavy course load of the program, the 20 additional credits on top of the required course-

work for their majors. This created a unique context that was a result of the program's bilingual honors curriculum. However, the challenges of prioritizing and dealing with major projects are not unique to the GCP. Students will face similar situations to varying degrees when they study abroad, and this will be exacerbated by the fact that exchange students will be working in their second language. The students in this study employed time management strategies taught in the course and still found it difficult to complete the project and other coursework. The pedagogical implication is that effective time management techniques should be explicitly taught as part of the curriculum. This is especially true for programs that prepare students for study abroad, as the students' challenges will be magnified by different culture and academic conventions.

An unexpected theme that arose from this study was the widespread use of technology. Although it is apparent that the younger generation has grown up in a more "connected" world because of the ubiquitous nature of technology, the frequency of use and the implementation of applications meant for social purposes defined the use of technology in this study. The fact that all students are constantly connected through mobile devices and social media applications was something they exploited in order to work together even when physically apart. This phenomenon of mobile connectivity occurred organically in this context, but it is something that could be leveraged by teachers. A deeper knowledge of how students employ technology could be used to inform pedagogical decisions about how to design group work, the teaching of communication for group projects, and the practice of time management.

Finally, the desired areas of additional support are likely the most significant factor when it comes to improving the group projects. The findings indicated that students might not openly seek the additional support they desire. Teachers need to take an active role in creating opportunities to discuss the requirements



of the project and to clarify what is appropriate. This does not mean that responsibility falls solely on the teacher. However, major assignments are oftentimes quite complex. Thus, no matter how explicitly the requirements are spelled out, there will be areas that the students will be unclear about. First, teachers need to take great care in explicitly communicating the requirements through a detailed handout. This needs to be supplemented with opportunities for students to communicate with the teacher to negotiate what the teacher truly wants from the project. Second, it shows that students take into account grading criteria and the overall learning goals of the project when constructing the final product. The more information of the instructor provides, the more the students can get out of the assignment through the metacognitive processes involved in completing the project.

The large proportion of out-of-class work is a significant commitment of major projects. This results in the majority of the research, revising, and preparation for the project being conducted in an unsupervised environment. The goal of this study was to provide a closer look at this out-of-class time so instructors can build a supportive framework within the course to allow students to be successful in such projects. This type of preparation will ultimately provide skills transferable to the study abroad contexts that students are being prepared for.

## Bio Data

**Raymond Yasuda** is a full-time lecturer at Soka University in Tokyo, Japan. He is currently the coordinator for the all the EAP courses within the World Language Center. He teaches on an English-medium economics program and the Global Citizenship honors program. He has taught at the secondary and tertiary levels in Japan and the United States since 2003. Areas of research interest include content-based instruction, academic writing, curriculum development, and computer-supported collaborative learning.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. Who was your partner for the research project?
2. What was your topic for the project?
3. How did you and your partner choose the topic?
4. How many hours per week did you spend on the research paper and presentation?

5. Did you use any English during your out-of-class work? If so, how did you use English? What percentage of the time did you work in English?
6. What percentage of time did you work together with your partner versus separately?
7. What were the biggest challenges you faced during out-of-class group work?
8. How did you overcome these challenges?
9. Did you use the following study skills in your out-of-class work? If so, how?
  - a. Peer editing
  - b. Drafting process for research paper and presentation slides
  - c. Creating outlines
  - d. Using other teachers as resources
  - e. Peer feedback on presentations
  - f. Research skills
10. Did you use language-learning strategies?
  - a. Presentation language
  - b. Grammar checking
11. Were there skills that could have been covered in class that would have helped you in your out-of-class work?
12. What are things that could have been done differently that would have helped you in successfully completing the group research project? What additional support or information did you think was necessary to complete the project?
13. What did you learn from this project?