

# An evaluation of the use of student-generated materials

This study focuses on learner reactions to a discussion project based on student-generated materials (SGM). SGM are linked to authenticity, investment in learning, motivation, and positive learning outcomes. However, SGM may represent a new and daunting experience for students unaccustomed to participatory learning. This study examines the reaction of Japanese university students to an SGM project based on creating discussion and decision-making scenarios for others to use later. Results from questionnaire data indicate that students have positive feelings about using materials created by peers. They show interest and engagement, and request more opportunities to work with materials created by other students. However, they feel less positively about actually creating such materials. They cite difficulty in finding an appropriate topic and writing clear background information and instructions. The pattern is somewhat related to language level with lower proficiency students showing a stronger preference for using others' materials rather than creating them.

本論は、学生が作成した教材(SGM)を使用したディスカッションプロジェクトへの学習者の反応について検証する。SGMの使用は、学生のやる気を増し、学習成果を向上させ、学習内容や学習するという経験自体にもより強い結びつきを感じさせるという報告がある。しかし、積極的に授業に参加する環境に慣れていない学生にとっては、SGMの作成は、まったく新しい、とまどう経験でもある。本論では、他の学生が授業で使用するSGM作成プロジェクトに参加した、日本の大学生の反応を検証する。具体的には、ディスカッショントピックを決定し、その結果結論を導き出すまでのシナリオの作成を行った。そのSGMを使用した学生からは、自分と同じ立場の学生が作成した教材の使用に対し前向きな反応があった。興味や積極的な取り組みが示され、他の学生が作成した教材をもっと使用したいという意見もあった。一方、適切なトピックの選択や分かりやすい指示をするのは難しいという理由で、自分自身がそういった教材を作成することについては、あまり積極的な反応ではなかった。その傾向はレベルによるところもあり、レベルが低い学生ほど、教材作成よりもそれを使用する立場のほうが良いという意見だった。

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Hudd (2003) argues that in university-level content teaching, having students create and assess their own assignments and classroom activities is a key factor in “enhancing participation and student ownership of the class” (p. 195). SGM can allow learners to change from passive consumers of content to active co-creators in the learning process. This new role empowers learners and is associated with increased motivation and participation on the one hand, and improved problem-solving skills and learning outcomes on the other. These activities also call on students to apply and develop social and communication skills that go beyond the actual class contents.

The benefits of the creation and use of SGM are seen by many as being inherently tied to the idea of collaborative learning which has been exhaustively researched in a variety of fields and at all levels of education. Barkley, Cross, and Major (2004) provide an overview of the effects of collaborative education including student satisfaction, deeper, more substantial coverage of contents, increased effort and persistence on the part of students, and positive attitudes towards both the contents and the learning experience. In this study, SGM are viewed as one way to tap into these benefits in language classrooms.

In some applications of SGM in language learning, students are seen as a source of rich language data. Learners' own language use and that of their classmates can be seen as a kind of input, an alternative to the teacher-fronted classroom with its simplified input made comprehensible for the students (Riggenbach,

1988). In modern classrooms, this kind of SGM is often seen in projects based on working with, assessing and co-constructing student-generated content in a blog, wiki or other online space (see for example Chartrand, 2012; Kent, 2010). In other, perhaps more expansive applications of SGM however, students are given control over and responsibility for not only language input but also patterns of interaction and activity design.

For some teachers, this wider definition of SGM is freeing, moving them beyond the constraints of a teacher-centered classroom. However, for others it may be uncomfortable. Brookfield (1999) talks about the need for teachers to take their students seriously and value their ideas. This implies the need for trust on the part of the teacher who starts an SGM project. Glenn (2003) points to fear of uncertainty and loss of control as two factors that keep teachers from using SGM. Speaking of her own teaching she said,

I put too little trust in my students and refused to relinquish control, perhaps out of fear that the course, no longer fully my creation, would become something I did not anticipate or desire. Unpredictability was daunting and thus limiting. (p. 36)

For students also, creating and using SGM in the wider sense can be daunting. It calls on them to engage in learning in an entirely new way. Traditional roles of teacher as source and student as recipient of knowledge, what Sfard refers to as the “acquisition metaphor” of education (1998, p. 5), are rejected in favor of a more participatory experience. This can be especially problematic in a Japanese context where new university students in language classes tend to be seen as having “high order grammar and translation skills but poorly developed discussion and thinking skills” (Williams, 2011, p. 65). This implies that students may be, at least initially, uncomfortable with classroom tasks that challenge those underdeveloped skills.

However, far from being a fixed element of Japanese culture as some believe, this is related to students’ educational career (Rundle, 2007). Students typically experience extreme teacher-centeredness in high school and may not have exposure to other, more autonomous ways of learning. An overall lack of critical thinking skills and initiative is not limited to language classrooms but can be seen across the curriculum among first-year students and is often seen, by

both expatriate and Japanese faculty, as part of the overall difficulty of the transition from high school to university (Brown & Adamson, 2011). SGM projects that require students to think critically, address open-ended questions, and take initiative were seen by the researchers as one possibly effective, albeit challenging way of helping students make the transition.

Considering the researchers’ own misgivings about SGM and the potential challenge it represents for students, any such project needs to be implemented in consideration of how students are reacting to the experience.

## The current study

### Context

The current study was conducted in Oral Communication classes for first-year students at a small university in northern Japan as part of a semi-intensive English for Academic Purposes program for students in the International Studies and Regional Development Department. The Oral Communication classes meet once per week for 90 minutes. In addition, the students take six other skills-focused 90-minute EAP classes per week. The research involved 86 students, 22 in a higher proficiency class (TOEFL pbt scores at initial placement above 400) and 64 in 3 classes of lower proficiency (TOEFL pbt scores at initial placement between 350 and 400). The project took place in the second semester of the course following a semester of work on developing discussion and public speaking skills, as well as fluency and ease with spoken English.

### The SGM project

Students were asked to prepare classroom activities known as “negotiation scenarios” for their classmates. Negotiations in this case are defined as discussions with a clear goal that call for an evaluation of options and a clear final decision. Initially, students were given several negotiation tasks prepared by teachers in order to allow them to become accustomed to the format and procedure. Negotiations involved a certain amount of role-play as students were asked to assume the position of a stakeholder in the negotiation. For example in three scenarios used early in the semester, students were asked to negotiate as members of a PTA committee deciding how to allocate a school budget; members of a government advisory panel deciding which sports to encourage in an anti-obesity campaign;

and members of an elected legislature drafting a constitution for a newly independent nation. In one case, students acted as themselves in designing an award system to recognize the Student of the Year in their own school. These negotiations were conducted over two class sessions with the first dedicated to reading and understanding the negotiation scenario and generating a research plan. The actual sharing of research, discussions and decision-making took place in the second class.

The format of negotiation scenarios was developed by the researchers and consisted of five main sections (see Appendix A for a sample of a teacher-generated scenario).

- *Context* - sets the stage for the negotiation by outlining the situation, providing some background information and possibly useful data, and laying out the negotiation task.
- *Considerations* - lays out certain limitations or important points to keep in mind during the negotiations.
- *Preparation* - gives students a chance to outline questions or issues they want to think about before the negotiation, prepare a list of key words and phrases likely to come up during the negotiation, and think about what kind of information they are likely to need and where they might find it.
- *Decisions* - a formatted section where students can write down their group's final decisions about the negotiation task.
- *Self-evaluations* - a chance for students to reflect on their group's and their own performance in the negotiation.

After completing several negotiations prepared by teachers, students were assigned a mid-term project to prepare their own negotiation scenario. They worked in small groups (four to five students) and were free to prepare a scenario on any topic. They were asked to follow the general format of the teacher-generated negotiations used previously in class. To ensure that assessment criteria were clear from the outset, students were given copies of the rubrics to be used for teacher and peer assessment. The project was conducted on a four-week schedule. In week one, groups were formed and the project was assigned. Class time was given for initial planning and topic choice. In week two, students worked in class on writing the negotiation scenario, in particular the context and considerations sections. In week three, groups traded negotiations and students had their first chance to read scenarios written

by their classmates. Class time was given for reading and checking on any unclear points with the group that had written it. Students also developed a research plan in preparation for the following week. In week four, students actually used the other group's SGM and performed the negotiation. Following the negotiation they were asked to assess the quality of the other group's SGM (see Appendix B for a sample of a student-generated scenario).

## Results

Data was collected in student surveys conducted at the end of the semester following the completed SGM project. Students were asked about their reactions (their enjoyment of the process, how they perceived the value for their language learning and how difficult they found it to be) to aspects of the project in closed, Likert-scale questions and were invited to add open-ended comments. Forty-seven of 86 students responded. This is a somewhat low response rate opening the possibility that the results described below are skewed by self-selection bias with students who enjoyed the project tending to respond more frequently than those who did not.

An overview of the collected data (see Table 1) shows that students seemed to have enjoyed all aspects of the project. This is consistent with open-ended responses, with students reporting reactions like,

"I felt my group enjoyed deciding the topic and I learn how to make a project."

"Planning by ourselves [was fun]"

"Everyone tried to doing enthusiastically."

Interestingly though, actually writing the negotiation document was rated somewhat lower than other aspects (3.4 out of a possible 5) with five of 47 respondents reporting that they did not enjoy writing the scenario to some extent.

Students also seemed to see value in the project. Though they did not enjoy it as much as other aspects, students did report that writing the scenario had value for their language learning (3.9 out of a possible 5). Using another group's SGM in class was rated as the most valuable (4.0 out of a possible 5) with all respondents reporting that they at least somewhat valued using others' SGM. Open-ended comments about the value of the project included ideas like,

“Mid-term Project was interesting and I wanted to do not only [one] other group’s negotiation but also other group’s negotiations.”

“Scenario written by other students motivated me a lot.”

“I enjoyed do another group’s negotiation. That’s because we had to prepare for it. So when our negotiation was completed, I felt very glad.”

Looking at students’ perception of difficulty, they seemed to rate the overall experience as somewhat difficult. Interestingly, using another group’s SGM, which the students valued most highly, was also seen to be the most difficult aspect of the project. Comments from students and teachers’ classroom observations seem to indicate that this was due to quality and clarity issues in the writing of the negotiation scenario. As one respondent said,

“The negotiation of another group was difficult because we didn’t know what the negotiation meant.”

It seems that students were somewhat unclear about the objective of some others’ SGM.

**Table 1. Mean student evaluations of different aspects of the SGM project (1-5 scale)**

| Aspect                     | Enjoyment | Value | Difficulty |
|----------------------------|-----------|-------|------------|
| Deciding the topic         | 3.7       | 3.3   | 3.4        |
| Planning the negotiation   | 3.7       | 3.7   | 3.4        |
| Writing the description    | 3.4       | 3.9   | 3.4        |
| Doing others’ negotiations | 3.7       | 4.0   | 3.7        |
| Scoring other groups       | 3.7       | 3.7   | 3.4        |

Breaking down the results by proficiency level (see Table 2), we can see significant differences between the high and low proficiency groups in two areas. Unpaired *t*-test results indicate that students in the lower proficiency group found the task of writing the negotiation documents more challenging ( $t = 2.0770, p = 0.0435$ ). They also seemed to place more value on completing negotiations written by others ( $t = 2.0212, p = 0.0492$ ). A further difference, which can be

**Table 2. Mean student evaluations of different aspects of the SGM project, broken down by proficiency level with unpaired two-tailed *t*-test comparisons**

| (1-5 scale)                | Enjoyment                |      | Value                    |      | Difficulty               |      |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|--------------------------|------|
|                            | Low                      | High | Low                      | High | Low                      | High |
| Deciding the topic         | 3.7                      | 3.8  | 3.5                      | 3.1  | 3.2                      | 3.2  |
| <i>t</i> -test             | $t = 0.0268, p = 0.9787$ |      | $t = 1.4056, p = 0.1667$ |      | $t = 0.0268, p = 0.9787$ |      |
| Planning the negotiation   | 3.5                      | 4.0  | 4.1                      | 3.7  | 3.5                      | 3.5  |
| <i>t</i> -test             | $t = 1.8066, p = 0.0675$ |      | $t = 1.2485, p = 0.2183$ |      | $t = 0.0588, p = 0.9534$ |      |
| Writing the description    | 3.4                      | 3.5  | 4.0                      | 3.9  | 3.6                      | 3    |
| <i>t</i> -test             | $t = 0.3034, p = 0.763$  |      | $t = 0.1070, p = 0.9152$ |      | $t = 2.0770, p = 0.0435$ |      |
| Doing others’ negotiations | 3.7                      | 4.14 | 4.2                      | 3.8  | 3.2                      | 3.5  |
| <i>t</i> -test             | $t = 1.3974, p = 0.1691$ |      | $t = 2.0212, p = 0.0492$ |      | $t = 1.0040, p = 0.3207$ |      |
| Scoring other groups       | 3.4                      | 3.4  | 3.7                      | 3.6  | 3.2                      |      |
| <i>t</i> -test             | $t = 0.0574, p = 0.9545$ |      | $t = 0.4527, p = 0.6529$ |      | $t = 0.4067, p = 0.6861$ |      |

thought of as somewhat significant, is seen in planning. Higher proficiency students seemed to enjoy the planning phase more ( $t = 1.8066$ ,  $p = 0.0675$ ).

Similar  $t$ -test comparisons showed no significant differences between male and female students' responses.

Looking to the future, students seem to want the project to continue. When asked if they wanted to repeat the project (i.e., make another negotiation for their classmates to use), 24 of 47 respondents (51%) said they would like to. When asked if they thought the SGM project should continue for next year's freshman class, 40 responded positively (85%). Two-tailed Fisher chi-squared tests showed no significant differences between proficiency and gender groups in these responses. Students comments also showed that, by and large, they think the project should continue.

"We should spend [more] class time."

"I want to continue this project."

Students also had some constructive feedback on this project. They mentioned two areas in particular that need attention. On the question of topic choice, they seemed to want more guidance:

"There should be limits on topic choice so that all groups produce similar academic contents."

"It would be better to decide on a broad genre for all projects. This would make planning easier. Perhaps each group can be assigned its own genre."

Time as also an important factor for some respondents:

"We need more time."

"Increase the time for the negotiations."

General comments at the end of the survey showed that the students seemed to have had an overall positive experience, with, of course, some mixed feelings:

"I like negotiating in a group!"

"Giving our negotiation to another group was kind of like bragging but I am glad we did this project."

"I enjoy this semester rather than first semester."

"It was easier to speak positively than speech and discussion."

"Planning was difficult because we had to decide all of the negotiation, but this project was a good experience for me."

"This was interested and important. Connecting with 1 semester's skills and this project."

"It was good to prepare our own topic."

## Discussion

In classroom observations, the teachers involved in this project noted that students seemed engaged and motivated. Classroom interactions, in both the preparation of SGM and the use of others' SGM, went far beyond simple conversation, combining oral communication class with the learning of fundamental academic skills and the development of autonomy. In addition, students' research notes were generally more comprehensive and detailed than they had been during teacher-generated materials activities, indicating that they had worked harder to prepare for SGM. These observations, combined with the clear overall positive message from students' feedback lead us to conclude that the SGM project was a success, though a qualified one, with some interesting implications for change coming from student feedback.

First and foremost, more time needs to be dedicated to the project. In the SGM preparation phase, problems that students had with the process can all be, to some extent, solved through allowing more time. The difficulty and lack of enjoyment in planning may be ameliorated with less time pressure and the difficulty in writing the actual scenario can be helped by providing more class time (as opposed to homework) for editing and teacher feedback. Teachers directly correcting or rewriting certain elements of the SGM documents may be called for in some cases but this may run counter to the students' sense of accomplishment and motivation. Therefore, self-correction based on feedback, though time consuming, seems to be appropriate. This will also likely help in dealing with the difficulties found by some groups in using other groups' SGM due to poor writing.

More time may also be required before the SGM project even begins. In this study, students participated in three or four (depending on their class) teacher-created negotiations before being assigned the SGM project. Three run-throughs may not have been enough to allow them to fully develop their negotiation skills or fully appreciate the amount and kind of information needed for a successful negotiation. Introducing the SGM later in the course seems called for.

A final implication for change is seen in topic choice. In the current study, groups were free to choose topics. However, this led to some unclear SGM and a feeling among both students and teachers that some negotiations were more academic or deeper than others. For example, a group that prepared a detailed negotiation dealing with Japan's post-tsunami energy crisis was asked to use a thematically lighter negotiation, prepared by classmates, on the topic of popular hairstyles for girls. Teachers and students agree that clearer guidance on topic choice is called for.

## Conclusions

Student-generated materials are associated with benefits including both increased motivation and engagement with learning. Observation of one SGM project in an EFL context has shown that these benefits can be realized. However, teachers implementing SGM projects need to be sensitive to students' reactions and provide enough time for guidance and editing, as well as setting limits on topic choice, in order to allow students to generate the best possible materials for their classmates.

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4. *Renovations* - The school buildings are quite old. By replacing windows, adding insulation and installing a new heating system, the school could become much more energy efficient and environmentally friendly.
5. *Hiring an ALT* - The JET program budget has also been cut and MEXT is no longer supplying an ALT for your school. You have the option to hire an ALT independently.
6. *School Lunch* - Currently a fresh hot school lunch is served to all students but the costs are rising. While the parents pay for the actual food, the school can longer pay for the cooks and nutritionists without additional funding.
7. *Sister Schools* - Every year the school sends 5 students each to three sister schools (in China Russia and Korea) and welcomes 5 students from those schools for a 2 week exchange program.
8. *Music programs* - The school has always had a popular music program. Many students take music classes and both the student chorus and brass band compete in music festivals around the country.
9. *Replacing outdated gym equipment* - The gym has not been updated since the school opened nearly 25 years ago. The facility itself is in good condition but the sports equipment is old and often broken.
10. *Library* - Most of the books in the library are in bad condition and students have been complaining that there are no new titles in the collection. In addition, the computers used for inventory are old and often don't work properly. The school would like to update the library's collection and equipment.

## Appendix A: A sample of a teacher generated negotiation scenario

### Planning the School budget

#### Context

These days, Japan is well known as an aging society. While the average age of the population increases the number of school age children is falling. With the fall in the number of students, budgets are also being cut. After paying for teachers' salaries, utilities and basic maintenance for facilities very little money is left over for special projects. Most schools are having to make difficult decisions about which programs and services to fund.

As a member of the PTA, you are being asked to help decide which programs should be prioritized for next year's budget at your local junior high school. The school board wants to get your input before they make any final decisions. Your job today is to make a final recommendation on which programs should get funding.

#### Considerations

The school board has asked the PTA to consider the following points during your negotiation.

1. The funded programs should be those that have the greatest positive impact on the school community as a whole.
2. The school board wants to balance academic and extracurricular activities but the top priorities should be for basic school programs.
3. There are 10 proposed projects for next year's budget but the school board estimates that it will only have enough money in the budget to fund 5 of them at most.
4. Be sure to rank your choices from 1 - 5.

### 10 Proposed projects

1. *Assemblies* - In the past, the school has invited famous performers to the school such as traditional drummers, Rakugo story tellers, Kabuki actors, or ballet dancers. In next year's budget the school is hoping to invite a professional orchestra and a modern dance troupe.
2. *Replacing outdated laboratory equipment* - The science labs have not been updated since the school opened nearly 25 years ago. Students in Science class are working with out of date and often broken equipment.
3. *Guest speaker program* - The school would like to invite members of the community, national figures, artists, musicians, business people, etc as special teachers or guest speakers.

#### Preparations

A) *Key Ideas* - Make a list here of some information that you think will be helpful for the negotiation. What questions do you need to think about before starting the discussion?

- How have other school answered this question?
- What should a school's priority be?
- 
- 

B) *Vocabulary* - make a list here of some words and phrases that you think might be helpful for the negotiation.

From the Handout

- Budget
- Fund
- 

My Own Ideas

- 順位 = ?????
- 
-

## Appendix B: A sample of a student-generated negotiation scenario

### The Best Way to Study English

#### Context

Studying English is very important because UNP has faculty of International Studies and Regional Development. However, we should study other subjects, too. It means we don't have enough time to study only English. So, we must find out the most effective way of studying English.

Your job in today's negotiation will be to prioritize 5 ways of studying English. Your goal is to rank 5 ways most likely to be effective in improving average student's English skill. It will help your classmates or the next year's freshman. You will also have to list 3 ways which are considered least likely to be effective.

#### Considerations

1. Remember you are an average student.
2. Don't choose an eccentric way because this negotiation is for average students.
3. Rank the best way from most effective 1 to least effective 5. For the ways on your ineffective list, ranking is not necessary.
4. Here are some other questions you may want to think about.
  - How much time can we spend on studying English?
  - How much can we spend on studying English?
  - Is the way interesting?
  - Which is the meaning of "effective"? (efficiency or least effort)
  - What's an ineffective way to study English for you?
  - Which way is more effective? (by yourself or group working)

#### Preparations

A) *Key Ideas* – Make a list here of some information that you think will be helpful for the negotiation.

- Which ways are you using now?
- What types are there?
- 

B) *Vocabulary* – make a list of some words and phrases that you think might be helpful for the negotiation.

From the handout

- prioritize
- 

My own ideas

- 暗記する = ?????
- 

| Question              | Where I might find an answer | Source | Notes |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|--------|-------|
| What types are there? |                              |        |       |
|                       |                              |        |       |
|                       |                              |        |       |

Research – What do you need to find out to prepare for the negotiation? How/where will you find it?

Free Notes

Decisions:

Dear New Students,

Welcome to UNP. As you know, English is an important part of studying at UNP, especially for 1st year students. So we want to give you some advice about how to study English effectively. Based on our research and our own experience, we recommend these study methods.

A) The 5 most effective ways to learn English

1. Reasons
2. Reasons
3. Reasons
4. Reasons
5. Reasons

Also, We know that these study methods are popular with some people, but we recommend that you avoid them.

B) The 3 least effective ways to learn English

1. Reasons
2. Reasons
3. Reasons