Teaching Practice

Improving the Effectiveness of Cooperative English University Workshops in Japan

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This paper reviews the research on cooperative learning and how it has been applied to the organization and utilization of cooperative English University workshops in Japan. Every year, the authors of this paper take students to participate in several cooperative English workshops, and based on current cooperative learning research, data taken from participant surveys, and personal observations, they suggest several ideas for maximizing their effectiveness, particularly concerning workshop preparation, group dynamics, advisor involvement, and providing opportunities for self-reflection.

Despite having studied English for eight years before finishing high school, most Japanese students arrive at university with only limited communicative ability. This recently became an area of concern to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), who after extensive investigation concluded that English education must place a much greater priority on critical thinking and the ability to express oneself in English (MEXT, 2014). Helping students develop these important skills has become one of the main challenges for university English instructors, as Japanese students with communicative ability in English will have a major advantage in gaining employment upon graduation in the hugely competitive global workforce. However, communicative language teaching has not been successfully incorporated into traditional classroom teaching methodologies in Japan, likely because evaluating integrated communicative skills in student-centered learning requires subjective assessment measures that many teachers feel uncomfortable incorporating into their overall assessment framework (Sarich, 2016). One possible way around this issue is by offering cooperative workshops outside of the classroom, where motivated students can develop their practical skills by working on problem-solving activities in small groups using English as the medium of communication. This paper will review several cooperative university English

workshops that the authors have taken part in, report on some of the issues that have arisen and how they have been resolved, and offer some ideas on how to improve their effectiveness based on research on cooperative learning, responses from participant surveys, and teacher observations.

Background

Preparing students with the linguistic skills necessary to be productive members in a global workforce after they graduate served as the primary motivation for this report, which was based on a student-needs analysis by the authors of this paper, who work at a small Japanese university with two faculties. Students from the Faculty of Cultural Policy and Management tend to be highly motivated to improve their communicative English skills, mainly for the purposes of studying overseas or preparing to use English in their future careers. Students from the Faculty of Design, however, seem much more focused on developing their design ability, despite being aware that practical English skills could be of significant benefit to them in furthering their careers as professional designers. Some design students revealed in personal interviews that they did not feel the General English classes they were required to take were relevant to them, which had a negative effect on their motivation. This seems to be consistent with the research on Japanese university English learners in general, who tend to score comparatively low on the willingness to communicate (WTC) scale (Matsuoka & Evans, 2005), even though participation in cooperative learning activities has been demonstrated to raise WTC scores, which are closely linked with motivation to use English (Matsubara, 2007). It was therefore decided that the most suitable response should be to provide students with greater opportunities to develop practical English skills through participation in cooperative workshops outside the classroom.

Over the past five years, the authors of this paper have taken students to several cooperative English workshops throughout the calendar year, also acting as workshop advisors, and in some cases involved in their planning and organization. In late June, for example, interested students can participate in Japan English Model United Nations (JEMUN), a multi-university cooperative workshop with over 300 participants, where students represent individual countries and discuss world humanitarian issues. Following this, in August, design students from a partner university in Turkey are invited to our university to participate in a week-long international cooperative English design workshop, where students conduct research on a design theme, develop business and product ideas, and then present their ideas to professional designers for feedback. In December, interested students are invited to participate in the Asian Community Engagement (ACE) workshop, a two-day multi-university cooperative workshop in which the participants are presented with problems that local Japanese companies are facing; student teams are tasked with developing solutions that they must subsequently present to those companies for comments and feedback.

While the theme and focus of each workshop differ, the basic format for all of the cooperative English workshops that we are involved in is the same; participants are first presented with a problem that they are required to research either before or during the workshop. They are then placed into groups to brainstorm possible solutions and after arriving at a consensus, each group then starts working on a presentation for constructive feedback. English is the main

medium of communication, and the teachers who bring students usually act as workshop advisors to offer help when it is needed.

Johnson, Johnson, & Smith. (2014) concluded that cooperative learning only improves learning outcomes relative to individual work if certain conditions are met; group members must have frequent opportunities to interact and feel that the tasks that they are engaged in are meaningful (establishing positive interdependence), face to face interaction needs to be encouraged, and each group member must be held individually accountable. Similarly, cooperative learning is thought to be most beneficial when it is well structured and the tasks are appropriately challenging (Gillies & Boyle 2010).

Although this research on cooperative learning has been taken into consideration when designing the cooperative university English workshops, some inevitable issues during planning and implementation have occurred. What follows is an explanation of some of the issues that have arisen and measures that have been taken to resolve them, based on relevant research, feedback from participant surveys, and teacher observations.

Results

Although each of the workshops share the common theme of providing participants with the opportunity for purposeful language use, details of each event differ widely in terms of the theme, length, group design, and goals. Typically, at the end of each workshop, participants are asked to answer a short survey of approximately ten questions, including free space to write personal comments. Table 1 offers a sample of the participant responses from the ACE cooperative workshop in 2017.

Table 1

Sample Participant Survey Results (N=61)

Most useful pre-workshop activities?	**Talking with other participants about the workshop**	**20**	**33%**
	The pre-workshop research that I undertook	**19**	**31%**
	Other	**22**	**35%**
Most valuable part of the workshop?	**Discussion with the other group members in English**	**24**	**39%**
	Working on the group presentations	**20**	**33%**
	Feedback from private-sector professionals	**15**	**25%**
	Other	**2**	**3%**
Any problems during the workshop?	**I couldn't express myself well enough in English**	**24**	**39%**
	We spoke too much Japanese	**13**	**21%**
	The theme was too difficult	**13**	**21%**
	No particular problems	**11**	**18%**

As indicated in Table 1, many participants indicated that the chance to talk with other group members as well as to conduct research before the workshop were most helpful in preparing them for the discussions that they were to undertake. During the workshop, numerous participants indicated that the chance to carry on discussions with other group members in English as well as working to make the final presentations were most valuable for them, with a

slightly smaller number responding that the chance to consult with professionals from the private sector was meaningful as well. In reflecting on difficulties that they had encountered, some participants indicated that they were unable to express themselves in English as well as they had hoped. Another common concern was that the groups reverted to communicating in Japanese or that they had difficulty grappling with the workshop theme.

The large majority of the respondents reported in individual comments that they felt the tasks they engaged in were meaningful and an authentic simulation of what they expected to be doing after they entered the workforce. Participants also indicated that they enjoyed meeting other like-minded students, and that the group work helped them develop important skills in negotiation, problem solving, leadership, and intercultural understanding. Participant A, for example, remarked, "*It was really difficult and hard work to communicate with English but it was really fun too. And I was able to meet awesome people.*" Participant B commented, "*It's a good opportunity to look for the solution of real company's problem by researching in advance, and discussing with team members. However, I was frustrated by one of the team member's stubborn ideas, so the unity of the team came apart.*"

Discussion

There are some specific issues of planning and implementation that have arisen when cooperative learning occurs in the form of university English workshops. An explanation of these issues and the attempts that have been made to resolve them may be of some benefit to those who may be interested in becoming further involved, either by sending students to participate, or in organizing their own cooperative workshop. All of the conclusions drawn in this paper were derived from research on cooperative learning, responses on participant surveys, an example of which is shown in Table 1, or from personal observations made by organizers and advisors.

Workshop Preparation

Contrary to what one might assume, it has been reported that many students, particularly those in Asia, are not comfortable with cooperative learning (Xiaoping, Mohan, & Early, 1998). The uncertainty on how to proceed and the lack of clear roles and short-term goals can be quite stressful for those who are unaccustomed to student-centered learning (Loh & Teo, 2017). Participants also tend to compare their level of ability to that of the members in their group, which can be intimidating at times. It has been observed that Japanese students in particular tend to attribute any communication problems or disagreements on their own lack of English ability, which can affect their confidence. Fortunately, much of the anxiety that participants experience can be mitigated through pre-conference preparation and training, which has also been shown to produce greater benefits to learning (Gillies & Boyle, 2010). Moreover, pre-conference training offers the opportunity to practice managing conflict, such as how to respond when they do not understand, or how to politely introduce a new idea. In JEMUN and ACE, for example, all participants are asked to complete a pre-conference preparation assignment, as well as attend several training sessions where they are made familiar with workshop procedural rules, specialized vocabulary, and conduct role plays. The cooperative English design workshops use a similar system. Participants are invited to gather every week

for two months before the workshop in order to get them thinking about design ideas and how to express them in English. These training sessions not only help increase exposure to and build confidence in using English, they also help forge a sense of solidarity among the participants, contributing to the establishment of positive interdependence. Moreover, Ito (2017) reported that cooperative learning is most effective when the participants are prepared with knowledge on task management and group interaction.

Participant Contribution

A common concern that occurs in cooperative English workshops is whether all group members are actively contributing within their groups. It is likely that members with greater confidence, leadership ability, or those with a higher level of English ability will take on a more central role. However, holding the participants individually accountable for output and fostering a feeling of positive interdependence among group members provide strong incentives for each participant to make a productive contribution (Johnson et al., 2014). Having students take part in pre-workshop training also increases their ability to actively participate. Practically speaking, it has been the authors' experience that there is a much higher level of participation when students joined the workshops voluntarily compared to when they were compulsory. Moreover, choosing a workshop theme that is challenging yet personally relevant to the participants can have a substantial effect on their participation level.

Using English to Communicate

As indicated in Table 1, a common issue that occurs in cooperative workshops is the tendency for some students to revert to their native language in order to confirm their understanding. Participants, therefore, need to be gently reminded that English should be the primary mode of communication and relying on one's native language should only be as a last resort. Flexibility is key here. Insisting that English be the only medium of communication can deprive some participants of their ability to actively take part in the discussions. However, without any directions or reminders from advisors, some groups may communicate almost entirely in Japanese, which can be counterproductive, not to mention frustrating for those participants who are eager to use English.

Are Cooperative Workshops Really Beneficial?

One of the perceived downsides of cooperative workshops is that due to their subjective nature, it is difficult to provide hard evidence that they are of quantifiable benefit to the participants. There is no score or other form of summative assessment at the end that demonstrates whether participants have improved or actively participated, which may leave some university administrators doubtful of their worth. However, participants mostly responded that they found the experience worthwhile primarily because they were able to receive formative assessment in the form of feedback from their peers, participant advisors, and from members in the community. In this regard, Gillies & Boyle (2010) report on the extensive research advocating the positive effect that formative assessment has on achievement and improved performance. Furthermore, Jones & Jones (2008) report on the importance of offering frequent opportunities for group participants to reflect on their own performance. In cooperative workshops, this can be achieved through direct feedback from advisors, by having

participants complete post-workshop surveys, or by gathering after the workshop to share in a discussion of experiences. It is important to note that in cases where participants might have had a negative experience, for example, if they were unable to overcome some difficulty in their group, or they felt that their English level was not high enough for them to actively take part, the chance to reflect on experiences after the workshop offers a valuable chance to remind the participants not to compare their level of ability to that of their peers, and that even a difficult experience can offer many chances for growth and learning. Moreover, offering those participants who felt they could have done better the chance to try again the following year offers a great incentive to improve.

Group Dynamics

The makeup of each group in terms of size, level of ability, and academic background, is believed to have a strong impact on how well the members are able to interact (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

It has been the authors' experience that groups with 4-6 members seem to operate most effectively, because it is easier to establish positive interdependence while holding each participant individually accountable with a role in the final presentation. With larger groups, there is a greater chance for some of the less confident participants to be marginalized.

In all of the cooperative workshops, the participants are divided into groups from different academic and cultural backgrounds, with varying levels of English proficiency, because this is likely to be similar to what the participants will encounter after they enter the workforce. Naturally some participants will gravitate to positions of leadership. However, although it is believed that students of a higher linguistic L2 ability can play a crucial role in facilitating the understanding of the group (Xiaoping et al., 1998), there is a legitimate concern that some participants who lack confidence or have a lower level of English ability may not get the chance to contribute substantially. As mentioned earlier, pre-workshop training can do much to help build confidence, but at times it may be important for the workshop advisors to step in and remind everyone that the most successful groups are those that take into consideration the opinions of all members.

Another essential element of group dynamics is that participation in these workshops must be voluntary. In virtually every circumstance where participation in these workshops has been made mandatory, for example, by connecting workshop participation as part of a course grade, it negatively affected motivation to participate, to the detriment of the entire group. Contrastingly, giving participants control over their own interactions, through activities such as pre-workshop SNS communication or encouraging them to get together in the evenings for social activities, all serve to strengthen the sense of group solidarity, and thus enhance positive interdependence.

Advisor Involvement

Most of the teachers who bring students to participate in these workshops also act as advisors, and some are even involved in planning and organization. One question that is often asked by new advisors concerns how actively they should be involved in the group work. Certainly,

offering ideas to the groups when they seem stuck or directing the course of group discussions may save time and a great deal of frustration. However, it is the authors' belief that too much advisor involvement might deprive the participants of valuable opportunities to manage their own conflicts. All groups are going to encounter issues, but it is the process of working through them that can develop the valuable skills of negotiation and compromise, and resolving them is believed to lead to a greater sense of group unity and better productivity (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2009). As a general rule of thumb, advisors should try to avoid giving input on problem solving and instead focus their advice on group dynamics. Another helpful role for advisors is in reminding the group members what they need to accomplish and how much time there is left. Some groups may get caught up at one stage of the process, so letting them know what stage of the process they should be on and reminding them how much time they have left can be extremely helpful. Finally, one of the most important roles the advisors have is in helping participants prepare for their final presentations. This is when the advisors should be at their busiest: proofreading, helping participants rewrite their scripts, or even listening to them practice, all of which provide excellent opportunities to provide individual feedback.

Knowing when to step in is probably one of the greatest challenges for advisors. Those with experience in cooperative workshops tend to sit back and wait for groups to sort through their own issues before stepping in. Some less-experienced advisors have stated that they felt their presence was unnecessary because the participants did not need them. However, nothing could be further from the truth. The knowledge that there are professionals nearby ready to assist if necessary and to offer some gentle words of encouragement provides exactly the kind of safe environment for participants to work together comfortably.

Conclusion

The benefits of cooperative learning are well reported in research, however, not enough of it is believed to occur in higher learning (Jones & Jones, 2008). For university educators interested in preparing their students to excel in an international workplace, having students participate in cooperative English workshops outside of the classroom offers an excellent opportunity to develop practical English skills, critical thinking, and teamwork. However, there is still much to learn about how these workshops can be organized and implemented in order to maximize their value. The successful management of issues related to participant preparation, group dynamics, and advisor involvement can all do much to improve their effectiveness. It is hoped that the lessons learned by the authors will encourage more teachers to take part in what has become a valuable, almost essential, part of their students' university education.

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Acknowledgements

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