

# Oral Group Discussion: Perception of Japanese EFL Learners

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## グループ討論：日本人EFL学習者の意識

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### Summary

In a group discussion, the background of members could have an influence on group performance. This paper reports on the perception of Japanese EFL learners for group formation when engaged in a discussion. A set of questionnaire focusing on gender, acquaintanceship, and English language proficiency of group members was distributed to 230 undergraduates from three Japanese universities. Based on the data analysis, it is found that gender is the least important factor, and learners prefer to be with someone they know. English language proficiency is perceived as important where learners prefer to be grouped with those with similar or higher proficiency.

### 1. Introduction

Learning through group work has received attention in Japan and its employment has been strongly called for. This requires a shift in teaching approach in the classroom and learning style of students; from being passive learners to actively engaging in 'active learning' (Sugiyama & Tsuji, 2014). In this regard, group work has been seen as one activity that fosters active learning of students in the classroom.

There have been numerous studies which

focused on the benefits of group work (see next section on review of literature) but there have not been studies conducted in Japan about the perception of students toward group work especially about its group members.

This paper reports on a study which explored Japanese EFL learners' perception of group members in their engagement in group discussion.

## 2. Group Work

Group work in a language classroom has been regarded as an effective way to promote learning. It is suggested that increased opportunities to talk to each other in a group leads student to practice the target language (Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2015). In addition, numerous studies illustrate the benefits of group work in areas other than in language proficiency. Interaction in a small group leads to create rapport among students, fosters cooperation, and helps them to be autonomous learners (Harmer, 2015). Also, it is pointed out that learners are often motivated work together through group work (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) and thus is effective in motivating foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 2001). It is also argued that group work helps to reduce learners' anxiety as well as enhancing motivation (Brown, 1994; Crandall, 1999). Less threatening environment of a small group enhances learning of students with diverse skills and attributes. Reticent students, for example, feel comfortable to express themselves in a security and comfort of small groups of students (Brown & Lee, 2015). In sum, it can be suggested that as Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) point out group work enhances motivation and leads to productively in learning as learners create rapport and try to work towards the same goal.

Studies on group work among college students in Japan have also shown its benefit in students' linguistic development and also in affective aspects. Kato's study (2010) investigated students' performance through a student-centered writing course

where they solved problems, shared opinions, gave explanations to each other in groups and pairs. The study found that learners improved their communication skills in English, especially in language operation skills and discourse skills. Another study by Kato (2011) on students' preference for classroom activities found that students prefer group activities as they feel less anxious and because of its student-centeredness. Kato's study conducted in 2012 about classroom activities also found that group work which enhances relationships among its members led to increase their motivation. Fushino (2010) found that participation in group work enhances students' willingness to communicate (WTC) with their peers in the target language. Sugiyama and Tsuji (2014) compared students' motivation in courses taught in two different styles, one in a lecture style and the other in a style where the students discussed a given topic in groups. The differences generated by the participation in the two styles were compared through a questionnaire about their attitude toward a course, a questionnaire to measure their satisfaction toward the course, and written reports. In all the three aspects, it was found that the students who worked in a group showed more favorable outcomes (Sugiyama & Tsuji, 2014).

The literature about group work shows favorable outcomes in students' affective as well as language development. These studies on group work, however, seem to overlook students' attributes, such as their attitudes toward group work, learning strategies, learning styles, and gender. One

of the authors, through a questionnaire and personal interaction, found that in group work, students find it difficult to discuss with members whom they do not know. This can be explained by findings of Nelson (1995) who noted that the purpose of the group work to be different between the students in the US and Japan. Students in the U.S. regard its purpose to be a completion of a task, while students in Japan regarded group affinity to be important in group work. Ishii et al. (1978) showed that Japanese college students to be more apprehensive than the US college students, in pairs and in small groups conducted in classroom. Yuen (1996)'s finding explains that Japanese students' apparent passivity is greatly influenced and governed by their classmates. It seems to show that there are various aspects about group work to be beneficial for students other than a group being a community of learners.

### 3. Methodology

This study set off to find out the perception of undergraduate EFL learners on group discussion. A set of questionnaire, in English and Japanese, was used to gather the participants' perception. The questionnaire contained among others sections on profile of participants, participants' use of English language, and group discussion preferences which focused on three factors namely gender, acquaintanceship and English language proficiency of group members.

A total of 230 Japanese students (45% male and 55% female) from three universities in Japan participated. Majority of the participants were enrolled in Education, English Language and Literature, and Social

Science degree programme while a small number were from the Engineering and Science fields. In addition, three-quarters of the participants were either freshmen or sophomores (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 Year of study vs Gender

Year of Study	Male	Female	Total
Freshman	18.8%	20.1%	38.9%
Sophomore	16.1%	19.6%	35.7%
Junior	7.1%	10.7%	17.8%
Senior	2.2%	4.9%	7.1%
Others	0.4%	0%	0.4%
Total	44.6%	55.3%	99.9%

With regards their English language proficiency, 50.5% of the participants who disclosed their TOEIC scores falls under the Basic User category of the Common European Framework of Reference level (CEFR) while the remaining falls under the Independent User category (See Table 2 below).

Table 2 TOEIC scores of participants

CEFR Level	TOEIC Score Range	Percentage	According to Gender
Basic User	A1	120-220	0%
	A2	225-545	50.5%
Independent User	B1	550-780	43.0%
	B2	785-940	6.5%
Proficient User	C1	945-990	0%
	C2		

In relation to the use of English in a group discussion such as when discussing assignments, almost a quarter of the

participants claimed that they never used English while slightly more than a third said they rarely used it. Female participants contributed more to this. About the same percentage of male and female students (amounting to 31.1%) said they sometimes used English and 12% said they always used English (see Table 3 below).

Table 3 Use of English in group discussion

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
<b>Male</b>	8.0%	15.1%	16.0%	5.3%
<b>Female</b>	14.7%	19.1%	15.1%	6.7%
<b>Total</b>	22.7%	34.2%	31.1%	12.0%

#### 4. Findings

This section presents data and findings based on the three factors - gender, English language proficiency and acquaintanceship of group members.

##### Gender

In relation to the importance of gender of members in a group discussion, 40.4% of the participants stated that it was not important at all while 25.8% stated slightly important and 21.3% stated moderately important.

Table 4 Importance of gender

	Male	Female	Percentage
Extremely important	2.2%	2.2%	4.4%
Very important	5.8%	2.2%	8.0%
Moderately important	8.0%	13.3%	21.3%
Slightly important	10.2%	15.6%	25.8%
Not important at all	18.2%	22.2%	40.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>44.4%</b>	<b>55.6%</b>	<b>100%</b>

When asked how comfortable they would be if grouped with the same gender and with different gender, Table 5 reveals the findings.

Table 5 Comfort level with group members of same or different gender

	Level of Comfort	Male	Female	Total
<b>Same Gender</b>	Extremely comfortable	4.9%	4.9%	9.8%
	Very comfortable	4.9%	5.3%	10.2%
	Moderately comfortable	22.2%	28.0%	50.2%
	Slightly comfortable	5.8%	10.2%	16.0%
	Not comfortable at all	6.7%	7.1%	13.8%
<b>Different Gender</b>	Extremely comfortable	4.4%	4.4%	8.9%
	Very comfortable	8.0%	10.2%	18.2%
	Moderately comfortable	24.9%	33.8%	58.7%
	Slightly comfortable	4.9%	6.7%	11.6%
	Not comfortable at all	2.2%	0.4%	2.7%

Although gender was not seen as important, more than half of the participants said they would be moderately comfortable when discussing in groups with the same gender (50.2%) and different gender (58.7%). However, 13.8% said they would not be comfortable at all when grouped with the same gender while only 2.7% said so for different gender.

Nevertheless, when asked whether grouping learners according to gender would affect how group members interact and communicate with each other, 60.5% agreed it would (see Table below).

Table 6 Gender affecting interaction and communication

	Yes	No
Male	26.9%	17.9%
Female	33.6%	21.5%
Total	60.5%	39.5%

Language Proficiency

Another factor investigated was English language proficiency of group members. Slightly more than half (52.7%) stated it was either extremely important or very important (A2-4.4%, B1-21.6%, B2-26.8%) Only 8.6% (A2-2.2%, B1-3.2%, B2-3.2%) said it was not important (see Table 7).

Table 7 Importance of English language proficiency of group members

CEFR Level	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important
A2	2.2%	2.2%	0%	0%	2.2%
B1	10.8%	10.8%	15.0%	3.2%	3.2%
B2	10.8%	16.0%	9.7%	10.8%	3.2%
Total	23.7%	29.0%	24.7%	14.0%	8.6%

The participants were also asked if proficiency level of group members would affect interaction and communication with each other. Participants of CEFR levels A2, B1 and B2 who said language proficiency of group members were extremely important (95.5%), very important (81.5%) and moderately important (72.7%) agreed that the proficiency level of group members affects the interaction and communication with each other (see Table 8). Likewise, those who said language proficiency was not important (50.0%) also said proficiency level of group members would affect interaction and communication.

Table 8 Level of importance of English language proficiency affecting interaction and communication

Importance of language proficiency for group members	Language proficiency affect interaction and communication	CEFR Level			Total
		A2	B1	B2	
Extremely Important	YES	45.5%	45.5%	4.5%	95.5%
	NO	0%	0%	4.5%	4.5%
Very Important	YES	40.7%	33.3%	7.4%	81.5%
	NO	14.8%	3.7%	0%	18.5%
Moderately Important	YES	22.7%	50.0%	0%	72.7%
	NO	13.6%	13.6%	0%	27.3%
Slightly Important	YES	23.1%	15.4%	0%	38.5%
	NO	53.8%	7.7%	0%	61.5%
Not Important	YES	12.5%	25.0%	12.5%	50.0%
	NO	25.0%	12.5%	12.5%	50.0%

From Table 9, a total of 64.5% of the participants felt extremely comfortable or very comfortable if group members were of the same proficiency level. Slightly higher percentage (68.9%) said they would be extremely comfortable or very comfortable if the group members had higher proficiency level. In contrast, only 10.8% would be extremely comfortable or very comfortable if the proficiency level of group members was lower; even the CEFR A2 participants felt the same.

Table 9 Preferred proficiency level among group members

		CEFR Level			Total
		A2	B1	B2	
Have similar English language proficiency	Extremely comfortable	21.5%	16.1%	1.1%	38.7%
	Very comfortable	15.1%	7.5%	3.2%	25.8%
	Moderately comfortable	11.8%	19.4%	2.2%	33.3%
	Slightly comfortable	2.2%	0%	0%	2.2%
Have higher English language proficiency	Extremely comfortable	19.4%	11.8%	1.1%	32.3%
	Very comfortable	16.1%	18.3%	2.2%	36.6%
	Moderately comfortable	5.4%	4.3%	2.2%	11.8%
	Slightly comfortable	9.7%	8.6%	1.1%	19.4%
Have lower English language proficiency	Extremely comfortable	2.2%	2.2%	0%	4.3%
	Very comfortable	2.2%	3.2%	1.1%	6.5%
	Moderately comfortable	14.0%	20.4%	2.2%	36.6%
	Slightly comfortable	22.6%	9.7%	0%	32.3%
	Not comfortable	9.7%	7.5%	3.2%	20.4%
	Total	50.5%	43.0%	6.5%	100%

Acquaintanceship

The third factor probed was the importance of acquaintanceship among group members. The responses reveal that 30.4% participants stated extremely important, 23% stated very important, 25.7% stated moderately important, 12.6% stated slightly important and 0.7% stated not important at all. Hence, acquaintanceship seems to be an important factor when deciding members of a group.

On whether acquaintanceship affects

interaction and communication among group members over 90% of the participants agreed (see table below). The highest percentage of agreement is with those who said acquaintanceship was extremely important with almost 30% agreeing. This is followed by those who said acquaintanceship was moderately important (23.2%) and very important (22.3%).

Table 10 Level of importance of acquaintanceship affecting interaction and communication

		Acquaintanceship affect interaction and communication of group members	
		YES	NO
Acquaintanceship of group members	Extremely important	29.5%	1.8%
	Very important	22.3%	0.9%
	Moderately important	23.2%	2.2%
	Slightly important	10.3%	2.7%
	Not important	5.4%	1.8%
	Total	90.6%	9.4%

When in a group discussion, 47.4% of participants felt extremely comfortable if they knew all the group members while 41.7% felt moderately comfortable if there were a mixed of known and unknown group members (see Table 11). However, if with unknown group members, 30% would feel slightly comfortable and 28.3% not comfortable.

Table 11 Knowing group members

	Knowing all group members	Having known and unknown group members	Not knowing any group members
Extremely comfortable	47.4%	7.4%	5.2%
Very comfortable	18.7%	17.0%	7.8%
Moderately comfortable	19.1%	41.7%	27.0%
Slightly comfortable	11.7%	27.0%	30.0%
Not comfortable	1.7%	5.7%	28.3%

## 5. Conclusion

The study has compiled the perception of Japanese EFL learners about group members when engaged in group discussions. Findings reveal that gender is the least important among the three factors investigated. English language proficiency is perceived as important where learners prefer to be grouped with those with similar or higher proficiency. Acquaintanceship was perceived as the most important factor when Japanese EFL learners engage in group discussions. The findings give insights into group formation for group work activities. This in turn could assist teachers in optimising the potential of learners to be actively involved in their learning.

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## 要 旨

グループ討論では、メンバーの意識背景がグループの成績に影響を及ぼす場合がある。本書では、討論参加のためにグループを組む際の日本人EFL学習者の意識について報告する。性別、面識、英語力を中心として質問を纏めたアンケート用紙を3校の日本の大学に属する230人の学部生に配布した。データ集計の結果、性別は最も意識されない要素であり、学習者は性別に関係なく知人とグループを組みたがる傾向があることが分かった。英語力は意識される重要な要素であり、学習者は自分と同等かそれ以上の英語力のある学習者とグループを組みたがる傾向があった。