What Do We Want Small Group Activities for? Voices from EFL Teachers in Japan

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Yoshitaka Kato
Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan
<kato.yoshitaka.36u@st.kyoto-u.ac.jp>

Abstract

This paper discusses the fundamental issue of why small group activities are utilized in the language learning classroom. Although these activities have gained popularity in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), supported by a sound theoretical base, few studies have so far examined the reasons why language teachers are actually utilizing these methods in their classrooms. This study attempted to elucidate teachers' reasons, with the premise that their motivations can be categorized along the lines of the two central approaches to small group learning: cooperative learning (COL) and collaborative learning (CLL). Specifically, the researcher in this case study conducted semi-structured interviews with four EFL teachers in Japan. The interviews were transcribed and then examined via SCAT analysis (Otani, 2008). Findings suggest that language teachers adopt small group activities based on their sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) as to how second languages should be learned, and this sense of plausibility can be categorized as either COL-oriented or CLL-oriented. Although the results of the current study cannot be easily generalized, they do suggest that the COL/CLL framework can lead to better understanding of language teachers' beliefs about small group activities.

Keywords: cooperative learning, collaborative learning, reasons, EFL teachers

Introduction

Small group activities have been promoted for a variety of reasons in the second language learning classroom. The role of peer interaction, for example, is supported from both cognitive-interactionist and sociocultural perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis & Shintani, 2013). More specifically, the link between small group activities and SLA can be supported by the following: input hypothesis, interaction hypothesis, output hypothesis, sociocultural theory, content-based instruction, individual differences theory, learner autonomy, and affective factors (Abdullah & Jacobs, 2004; Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006). Empirical studies have also suggested positive effects of small group activities in such areas as the learning of grammar (e.g., Storch, 1999, 2007), vocabulary (e.g., Baleghizadeh, 2010; Dobao, 2014; Kim, 2008), and writing (e.g.,

Dobao & Blum, 2013; Storch, 2005; Storch & Aldosari, 2012; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009).

Despite these theoretical and empirical foundations of small group activities, few studies have so far investigated the actual reasons why language teachers are utilizing these activities in their classrooms. In this so-called "post-method" era (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001), language teachers have an increasing role as professionals in pursuing the most fruitful ways of teaching, depending on their own teaching contexts (Bax, 2003). Attempts to clarify teacher beliefs, therefore, would aid understanding of how and why small group activities are implemented in the actual classroom [1].

As far as the author knows, only Jacobs and Ratmanda (1996) have investigated the above issue. They queried 31 language teachers from six mostly English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Southeast Asian countries (i.e., Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) on the appropriateness of group activities in their educational contexts. They found positive responses on the use and appropriateness of the method. It should be noted, however, that their study asked teachers about the use of "group activities" as a general term, rather than specifying cooperative learning or collaborative learning. The research was done in that way in order to avoid confusion among the participants, because these terms were relatively new to the study's participants (p. 109).

Although the researchers' decision should be respected as a first step to understanding teachers' views, small group activities can be subdivided into cooperative learning (COL) and collaborative learning (CLL). These two central approaches of small group learning have been developed under different philosophies and historical backgrounds, and "when using one or the other method, teachers tend to make different assumptions about the nature and authority of knowledge" (Bruffee, 1995, p. 12). By using this dichotomy, therefore, it would be possible to further elucidate teachers' reasons for utilizing small group activities. This distinction might be a target of criticism by some researchers who do not emphasize the necessity of differentiating the two terms (e.g., Jacobs, 2015; Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, & Hawkes, 1995), but a tendency to use the two terms interchangeably has obscured their respective merits in foreign language education (Kato, 2015). Thus, making the dichotomy may help educators to better understand the underlying philosophy reflected in a given small group activity (Bruffee, 1995). Furthermore, because the relative differences between COL and CLL have been further explored in TESL studies (e.g., Kato, 2015; Oxford, 1997), the knowledge obtained in these studies can be used to better classify a given small group activity as COL-oriented or CLL-oriented. Therefore, the present study, applying this COL/CLL framework, attempts to elucidate the reasons why language teachers utilize small group activities in their classrooms.

Theoretical Framework: COL and CLL

As definitions of COL and CLL vary widely among researchers, this paper depends on the relative differences of COL and CLL rather than attempting to define each term separately. The significant features distinguishing COL from CLL are the degrees of task structure and of learner-centeredness (Kato, 2015). Supported by the two core

principles of positive interdependence and individual accountability (see, for example, McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006), COL tends to use highly structured tasks (Oxford, 1997) to make it more likely that every group member contributes to the group performance, thus seeking to avoid "free-riders." Aiming at motivating students and fostering their social skills as well as improving their academic achievement, teachers utilizing COL tend to encourage all group members to work together to achieve shared goals. On the other hand, teachers utilizing CLL tend to emphasize the outcomes generated through collaboration and value the negotiating process itself among participants rather than their harmonious and equal participation in an activity (Bruffee, 1995; Kato, 2015). Thus, CLL generally uses less structured tasks, presupposing learners will exercise autonomy to a greater extent. For instance, rather than prescribing the collaboration process by the division of labor among learners, CLL is likely to allow learners to engage in a task more flexibly.

Methods

This study was guided by the research question: "Why do EFL teachers in Japan utilize small group activities?" To answer the question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four EFL teachers working at secondary schools in Japan during the period of February to April 2015.

Research Setting

The researcher, who teaches EFL in Japanese universities, chose EFL teachers in Japan as interviewees. This was partially because interviews on teachers' beliefs or philosophies can only be conducted successfully when mutual rapport exists between interviewers and interviewees, which was possible in the researcher's local context (i.e., Japan). In addition, the situation in Japan was considered worth investigating because small group activities in Japan have been explored for over 50 years as, for example, represented by the study of Sueyoshi (1959) (see Sugie, 1995, for the development of small group activities in Japan).

Participants

The selection of the participants was based on the following two criteria: (a) the teachers had relatively rich experiences of utilizing small group activities in their classrooms, and (b) the teachers and the researcher had mutual rapport so that the teachers could talk about their teaching beliefs without hesitation. Based on these criteria, four EFL teachers in Japanese secondary schools were chosen as interviewees (see Table 1 for more information on the participants). All of them were native speakers of Japanese. The schools where they were working were college-oriented in general, and the English proficiency of their students varied from A1 to B1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001). All four participants were briefed about the study's aims and methods, and all signed informed consent forms allowing data from their interviews to be used in the study.

Table 1. Profiles of the Participants

	Teaching Experience	School Type	Degree
Teacher A (female)	34 years	high school	Bachelors in English Education Masters in English Education
Teacher B (male)	15 years	junior high school & high school	Bachelors in English Education Masters in English Education
Teacher C (female)	3 years	junior high school	Bachelors in Second Language Acquisition Masters in Second Language Acquisition
Teacher D (male)	13 years	(mainly) junior high school	Bachelors in English Literature Masters in English Education

Interviews

Ten questions were prepared in the interviewees' mother tongue (i.e., Japanese). Four of them (Q1–Q4) asked about the participants' teaching context. Data from these questions are summarized in Table 1 above. The other six questions asked about the small group activities the participants had used (Q5 & Q6), their reasons for utilizing these activities (Q7 & Q8), and their classification of their group activities as COL or CLL (Q9 & Q10).

The ten interview questions were sent to the four teachers beforehand (see Appendix A for the interview questions), which allowed them some time to frame their thoughts on the questions. Interviews lasted approximately one hour per teacher and were conducted in Japanese in a semi-structured manner, with the researcher sometimes adding questions to seek elaboration on the interviewees' answers. Before asking the last two questions, an explanation of the relative differences of COL and CLL was provided, and any questions the teachers had about these differences were answered.

Data Analysis

All the recorded speech data were transcribed using CasualTranscriber (Imao, 2015). In order to analyze qualitative interview data, the present study adopted the Steps for Coding and Theorization (SCAT) analysis method developed by Otani (2008). [2] SCAT analysis was developed for relatively small-scale data, based on grounded theory approaches (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and other qualitative methods. SCAT analyzes data by following a four-step coding process: The researcher edits segmented text by: (1) highlighting focused words from the text, (2) paraphrasing the focused words, (3)

describing words which explain the words in (1) and (2), and (4) describing themes and constructs, including a process of writing a storyline and offering theories that weave together the themes and constructs (Otani, 2008). An example of SCAT analysis of the interview data is shown in Appendix B.

Results and Discussion

Interview results are described below under the following three categories: the use of small group activities, reasons for utilizing small group activities, and teachers' judgments of their practice as either COL or CLL.

The Use of Small Group Activities

The participants were first asked to list some examples of small group activities they have used in the classroom (see Table 2). As a result, a variety of activities were elicited: speaking tasks (e.g., oral conversation, reading aloud), reading tasks (e.g., jigsaw reading), writing tasks (e.g., peer feedback), and skill-integrated tasks (e.g., projects).

Table 2. Examples of Small Group Activities Provided by the Four Teachers

	Activity Examples
Teacher A (female)	oral conversation, project-based tasks (e.g., making films), jigsaw reading, peer feedback
Teacher B (male)	oral conversation, reading aloud in pairs, paper chatting, jigsaw reading, peer feedback
Teacher C (female)	reading aloud in pairs, translation quizzes in pairs, peer editing, dictogloss
Teacher D (male)	oral conversation, translation quizzes in pairs, jigsaw reading, teaching and learning grammar in groups

Reasons for Utilizing Small Group Activities

This section summarizes the teachers' responses to Q7 (i.e., Why have you utilized these methods in your classroom?) and Q8 (i.e., How did you become interested in small group activities?). SCAT analyses of the transcribed data suggested that the teachers each utilized small group activities for unique reasons, but in a broad sense, the reasons could be categorized into two types: (a) as a tool for classroom management, and (b) to foster academic achievement promoted through collaboration.

(a) as a tool for classroom management

In the interview, Teacher B described his reasons for utilizing small group activities as follows:

> *...my students are not a group of students who have high motivation to acquire English. ...by using pair or group work, we can increase the number of the students*

participating in the class, or increase the time they are actively involved in the class, which can lead to language acquisition in an indirect way. (Teacher B, Question 7)

For him, student interaction is not a necessary condition for language learning. However, he realizes that it is rarely the case in school education, especially in an EFL country like Japan, that every student is sufficiently and constantly motivated to learn English. Thus, the major reason for him to utilize small group activities is to sustain students' participation as a way of classroom management. He also stated, "Because a student-student relationship can lower the affective filter of learning more than a teacher-student formal relationship and some students feel it easier to get involved with other class members than with a teacher, they are more likely to participate in group activities than in teacher-fronted activities."

(b) to foster academic achievement promoted through collaboration

On the other hand, Teachers A and C place more emphasis on what students could achieve through mutual collaboration with their peers. Different from Teacher B, they seemed to regard student interaction as a necessary condition for language learning. Being asked how she gained interest in small group activities, Teacher A answered:

…students might be able to memorize or learn vocabulary, grammar, or sentence structures without involving with others, you know, without interaction, but I don't think they could acquire language skills in a true sense. (Teacher A, Question 8)

Teacher A confessed that struggles throughout her career had changed her approach from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Learning from English-native assistant language teachers and studying teaching methods such as project work in her graduate school, she gradually realized that collaboration would be a key to language learning. Likewise, Teacher C, a novice teacher with three years of teaching experience, also believed that peer interactions would lead to language acquisition. She admitted she was influenced by socio-cultural approaches, based on the idea of Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) and collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994), where peers can create learning opportunities with each other.

The results reported in this section suggest that, as Prabhu (1990) argued, language teachers hold their own sense of plausibility, or "a personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning" (p. 172). The comments of the teachers indicated that, throughout their careers, they had been constantly developing this sense and their ways of teaching language.

As described so far, the reasons for teachers' adoption of small group activities can be considered in terms of classroom management and academic achievement facilitated through collaboration. While both reasons can be combined in the implementation of a given small group activity, the former reason could be categorized as COL-oriented, as it emphasizes the importance of every class member being encouraged, via a structured task, to take part in the activity. On the other hand, the latter reason for using group activities could be categorized as CLL-oriented, as it emphasizes learning outcomes which can be achieved through dynamic interaction among peers. It should be noted, however, that not every comment of the teachers could be categorized into either (a) or (b). Teacher D, for example, implied in his interview that both reasons motivated his use

of small group activities, and the reasons might have gradually changed through his teaching career path. This point will be further discussed in the next section.

Teachers' Judgment of Their Practice as COL or CLL

This section reports the teachers' answers on Q9 (i.e., Do you categorize your small group activities as COL, CLL, or others?) and Q10 (i.e., Why do you think so?). The results suggest that differences in orientation exist among teachers who use group activities. Teacher B, who emphasized classroom management, described his practice as COL-oriented, whereas Teachers A and C, who focused on the necessity and outcomes of peer interaction, categorized their practices as CLL-oriented.

Teacher D's case needs elaboration. His original motivation for utilizing small group activities was to fill in the gap between the more and the less proficient learners in his classroom. Sympathizing with the philosophy of COL, he first introduced the core principles of COL (i.e., positive interdependence and individual accountability) into his teaching practice. However, he gradually shifted his interest to less structured CLL-oriented tasks in which group members negotiate their contribution to the group. A possible reason for this shift was:

> *...I sometimes think that we teachers might be too kind to our students. I'm afraid instructing too many things, like saying "write your name here" or "do this, or do that," might prevent our students from fully developing their autonomy in their language learning. (Teacher D, Question 10)*

One of the core principles of COL, individual accountability, is to encourage each group member to do their fair share in the group. In the middle of his career, however, Teacher D began to feel that his students might not need to be instructed any more about their distinctive roles in the group activities. Presupposing that his students had developed a sufficient level of autonomy, Teacher D gradually shifted his teaching style toward CLL, where the students themselves negotiate the group roles for better learning outcomes.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that teachers familiar with small group activities might have different beliefs, or senses of plausibility, as to how language can be learned in the classroom. Although the four teachers all believed that students need to be actively involved in their language learning, some teachers placed greater value on the aspect of classroom management of small group activities, while others emphasized the dynamic role of interaction with peers in language learning. Their "voices" told us that even if teachers' visible activities appear to be the same, their underlying philosophies might differ.

The current study had at least two limitations. First, not every small group activity can be clearly categorized as COL-oriented or CLL-oriented. Thus, the discussion of differences between them needs to be interpreted as a matter of degree rather than a clear-cut dichotomy. Second, the results of this case study should not be easily generalized in other teaching contexts, as they are based on data collected from only four teachers in Japan. Therefore, more studies would enrich the findings of the present study.

Conclusion

By conducting semi-structured interviews with four EFL teachers in Japan, this study attempted to answer the question: "What do language teachers want small group activities for?" [3] SCAT analysis of the interview data suggested that teachers felt the need for utilizing small group activities influenced by COL-focused and/or CLL-focused teaching philosophy. These language teachers seemed to adopt both or either of the approaches, and their choice may have been changeable over the course of their careers. In our current post-method era, teachers are required to constantly develop their sense of plausibility by seeking an ever better method for their given set of conditions. The current study hoped to shed light on the evolving sense of plausibility of a small group of EFL teachers as they went about facilitating group activities among their students.

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Yoshitaka Kato is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Foreign Language Acquisition and Education at Kyoto University, Japan. He teaches English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes at the university level by utilizing small group activities. His research interests include cooperative and collaborative language learning and task-supported language teaching.

Notes

[1] Defining belief is one of the most difficult tasks in any academic field. This study, following the working definition provided by Borg (2001), defines it as "a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment" (p. 186).

[2] For more information on SCAT analysis, the following website might be helpful: http://www.educa.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~otani/scat/index-e.html

[3] The title of this article was patterned after that of Allwright (1981), "What do we want teaching materials for?"

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

(a) Questions on Teaching Context

Q1. Where have you taught English so far, in junior-high school or high school?
Q2. How do you define the English proficiency of your learners in general?
Q3. How long is your experience in total as an English teacher?
Q4. What was your major in university?

When small group activities are defined broadly as learning or attempts to learn by two or more people, how would you react to the following questions?

(b) Questions on Small Group Activities

Q5. Have you utilized small group activities when teaching English?
Q6. If so, would you tell me some examples of the activities?
Q7. Why have you utilized these methods in your classroom?
Q8. How did you become interested in small group activities?

Here, Cooperative Learning (COL) is defined as a teaching method or philosophy which structures tasks to a greater extent than Collaborative Learning (CLL), mainly aiming at teaching students the importance of the skills of working together as a member of a certain community. On the other hand, CLL is defined as less structured activities which assume learners' autonomy to a greater extent than COL, mainly emphasizing the learning outcomes generated or created through interaction among participants. Then, how would you react to the following questions?

(c) Questions on COL and CLL

Q9. Do you categorize your small group activities as COL, CLL, or others?
Q10. Why do you think so?

Appendix B: Analysis Example by SCAT

The following excerpt is from the answers of Teacher B to Question 7.

No.	Speaker	Text	(1) Focused Words or Phrases from the Text	(2) Paraphrase of (1)	(3) Concepts Accounting for (2)	(4) Themes and Constructs
24	Interviewer	Q7. Why have you utilized these methods in your classroom?				
25	Teacher B	I don't feel pair work or group work directly leads to the enhancement of language skills. They might contribute partially, but the core reason of adopting these methods does not lie in the direct contribution to the skill development, I believe.	don't feel, pair work, group work, directly leads, the enhancement of language skills	indirect contribution of pair/group work to the enhancement of language skills	teacher belief on the language skill development	pair/group work as an indirect way to second language development
26	Teacher B	Rather, the need for pair or group work must be discussed only in the context of English language teaching as a school subject. This is because learners who are fully motivated to learn English would study by themselves. They can develop their	the context of English language teaching as a school subject, fully motivated to learn English, develop their language skills alone, can learn autonomously without depending on peers	pair/group work may not be necessary if all the learners are motivated to learn English by themselves.	teacher belief on when pair/group work is not necessary	the condition where pair/group work is not necessary

No.	Speaker	Text	(1) Focused Words or Phrases from the Text	(2) Paraphrase of (1)	(3) Concepts Accounting for (2)	(4) Themes and Constructs
		language skills alone or by seeking for some help from an expert when necessary. It just suffices. So, in English learning, I don't think pair or group work is necessary. If, say, all of the 40 students in a given classroom are motivated enough with their English learning, they can learn autonomously without depending on peers.				
27	Teacher B	Given that, the core reason would be that they can be used as a way of classroom management. Because it is rarely the case that all the 40 students are fully motivated, especially in an ordinary school. Different from SELHi (i.e., Super English Language High School) or International Studies Dep., my students are not a group of	as a way of classroom management, rarely the case, all the 40 students are fully motivated, an ordinary school, the teachers' role, have students join in the class, concentrate on the class, a teacher-fronted classroom	low motivation of the students to learn English as a school subject, teachers' responsibility for maintaining students' motivation	motivation of English learning in an EFL country like Japan, teacher's role in an EFL classroom	small group activities as a way of classroom management

No.	Speaker	Text	(1) Focused Words or Phrases from the Text	(2) Paraphrase of (1)	(3) Concepts Accounting for (2)	(4) Themes and Constructs
		students who have high motivation to acquire English. Then, the teachers' role would have students join in the class, or concentrate on the class for 50 minutes. Of course, my students can sit still silently, but in a teacher-fronted classroom, some of them would think about different things irrelevant to the class contents or others may even begin their homework secretly.				
28	Teacher B	In order to increase the time students are focusing on learning English, I thought it would be better to organize the class by pair or group activities rather than one on one relationships between a teacher and students, for they can be relaxed because they can work	increase the time students are focusing on learning English, one on one relationships between a teacher and students, relaxed, work with peers with the similar level of English proficiency	using pair/group work in order to increase the time students are focusing on learning English and to relax them by having them study with their peers	small group activities as an enjoyable and relaxed way of learning English	affective reasons of using small group activities

No.	Speaker	Text	(1) Focused Words or Phrases from the Text	(2) Paraphrase of (1)	(3) Concepts Accounting for (2)	(4) Themes and Constructs
		with peers with the similar level of English proficiency.				
29	Teacher B	Thus, by using pair or group work, we can increase the number of students participating in the class, or increase the time they are actively involved in the class, which can lead to language acquisition in an indirect way.	increase the number of students participating in the class, increase the time they are actively involved in the class, language acquisition, an indirect way.	pair/group work for motivating students to learn English	teacher belief on the language skill development	small group activities for sustaining students' motivation to learn English

Storyline	This teacher regards small group activities as a way of classroom management to motivate students to learn English. This might assist students' language acquisition in an indirect way. Taking into consideration the context of EFL education as a school subject, where not all of the students are motivated enough with learning English, pair/group work can be utilized by the teacher because it can increase the number of students participating in the class or the time they are doing so. In these small group activities, students may feel relaxed and enjoy their learning more than in a teacher-fronted classroom.
Theory writing	・small group activities as a way of classroom management ・student motivation in the context of EFL education as a school subject ・motivating students by small group activities, which can lead to language acquisition in an indirect way
Further investigation	・Is it possible to consider his reasons as COL-oriented? ・Are these only the reasons why he adopts group activities? What else? ・What does he think about CLL-oriented activities?