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# Fellow Language Learners as Producers of Knowledge and Understandings: A Case of a Tertiary Japanese Linguistics Course

Harumi Minagawa

*The University of Auckland*, [h.minagawa@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:h.minagawa@auckland.ac.nz)

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

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# **Fellow Language Learners as Producers of Knowledge and Understandings: A Case of a Tertiary Japanese Linguistics Course**

**Harumi Minagawa**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports students' experiences of a coursework task in a Japanese linguistics course that embraces certain aspects of collaborative learning— aspects that are not practised widely in Japanese language learning situations. These involve the students looking at themselves as well as their fellow students as producers of knowledge and understandings rather than simply developing learners of a foreign language.

The task asked students to examine language use in a TV drama script in light of sociolinguistic norms described in the Japanese linguistics literature. The task had two phases and was designed so that it was not possible to complete the second phase without using a peer's findings from the first phase. Using their peers' findings as a "previous study" gave students an opportunity to take a critical interest in the work of their peers as a crucial step in achieving their own academic outcomes.

This paper discusses students' experiences of this task in relation to particular benefits of the collaborative mode of learning that have been reported in the literature, such as positive interdependence, widening one's point of view, and developing awareness that knowledge is a social construct that can be challenged. It also discusses the assessment design of the learning task, which allowed students to be assessed on their individual learning outcomes while requiring their peers' support in completing their work.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper reports students' experiences of a coursework task in a Japanese linguistics course that embraces certain aspects of collaborative learning— aspects that are not practised widely in a Japanese language learning situations. These involve the students looking at themselves as well as their fellow students as producers of knowledge and understandings. The paper also evaluates the assessment design of the learning task.

The introduction to this paper will discuss the benefits of collaborative learning that specifically concern this paper, the challenges of collaborative tasks in assessment, and collaborative learning practices in Japanese language education

in recent years. It will also introduce the research questions. The paper will then go on to explain the research design, describing the context in which the learning task took place, the design of the learning task itself, and its evaluation. This section is followed by the results and discussion, with a focus on how students came to see themselves as creators of knowledge and beneficiaries of collaborative learning while still taking individual responsibility for their own learning outcomes.

### **Benefits of collaborative learning**

Collaborative learning often refers to a classroom activity at any level of education performed by two or more students learning something together under some direction from a teacher. It is argued to produce better learning outcomes than individual and potentially competitive ways of learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Sharan & Shachar, 1988; Slavin, 1983, 1991). The purposes of collaborative learning, also referred to as cooperative or peer learning, are manifold.<sup>1</sup> Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (2001), for example, articulate five purposes of peer learning: “working with others;” “critical enquiry and reflection;” “communication and articulation of knowledge, understanding and skills;” “managing learning and how to learn;” and “self and peer assessment” (pp. 8-9).<sup>2</sup>

In higher education situations, Goodsell et al. (1992) describe the main advantage of collaborative learning in the following way: “Broadly defined, collaborative learning reforms classroom learning by changing students from passive recipients of information given by an expert teacher to active agents in the construction of knowledge” (p. 7). Bruffee (1999) advocates the importance of collaborative learning in tertiary education in the USA:

... in college and university education today, mature, effective interdependence - social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity - is the most important lesson we should expect students to learn.” (Bruffee, 1999, p. xiii)

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<sup>1</sup> In a broad sense, the terms “collaborative,” “cooperative,” and “peer” learning are used almost interchangeably. However, strictly speaking the difference between the terms “collaborative” and “cooperative” reflects the degree of structure in tasks, where collaborative learning refers to less structured tasks (see Goodsell, Maher, Tinto, Smith, & MacGregor, 1992, p. 7 for detailed discussion on the terms “collaborative” and “cooperative”).

<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of social interdependence, Johnson, Johnson, & Smith (2007, pp. 23-24) explain that five conditions are required for successful collaborative learning to take place: (1) “positive interdependence” that “promotes a situation in which students work together in small groups to maximize the learning of all members, sharing their resources, providing mutual support, and celebrating their joint success;” (2) “individual accountability” whereby “performance of individual students is assessed;” (3) “promotive interaction” that exists when “individuals encourage and facilitate each other’s efforts to complete tasks and achieve the group’s goal;” (4) “the appropriate use of social skills” such as “[l]eadership, decision-making, trust-building, communication, and conflict-management skills” that need to be purposefully taught; and (5) “group processing” whereby the group periodically reflects on the process collectively.

Johnson et al. (2007) state the additional benefits that collaborative learning brings to the improvement of the cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities of students:

[Collaborative learning] ... tends to result in higher achievement, greater long-term retention of what is learned, more frequent use of higher-level reasoning (critical thinking) and meta-cognitive thought, more accurate and creative problem solving, more willingness to take on difficult tasks and persist (despite difficulties in working towards goal accomplishment), more intrinsic motivation, transfer of learning from one situation to another, and greater time on task. (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 19)

In further regard to fostering critical thinking, Bruffee (1984) argues that collaborative learning helps students to see that knowledge is a “social construct” (p. 647), something that it is not fixed or imposed by an authority. Bruffee goes on to claim that collaborative learning, where the student becomes an active agent in the learning endeavour, challenges a more conventional learning situation such as one based on “hierarchy and individualism” (p. 647).

Within the context of the Australian higher education system, Boud et al. (2001, p. 6) argue that peer-assisted and self-directed learning develop “reflective practice and critical self-awareness.” They also claim that tertiary institutions are reassessing the goals of courses from specific to more generic learning outcomes, including skills such as learning to learn and lifelong learning, as well as skills to be able to work with others (p. 5). The importance of developing transferrable skills is echoed in New Zealand’s *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019* (Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014, pp. 9-10).

Of all the benefits of collaborative and peer learning, however, what the current paper is concerned with most, apart from “working with others” (or “positive interdependence” in Johnson et al., 2007, pp. 23-24), are the aspects of developing “critical enquiry and reflection” and the “perception of knowledge as a social construct”, and their application to tertiary language learning experiences.

### **Issues of collaborative learning: assessment**

Collaborative learning is not without issues. For example, Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway, and Krajcik (1996, pp. 38-39) discuss several issues that need to be considered when carrying out collaborative work. Such issues include: weak learners may get a “free ride” while the strong ones may dominate the process; the task needs to have more than one answer so that students can benefit from each other’s different perspectives; students may not know how to help others in an effective way; both individual accountability as well as rewards as a group are

essential; high achievers tend to help the group members more if the group rewards are interdependent.<sup>3</sup>

Bruffee (1999) states “Most students do not collaborate on substantive issues in their academic courses. If they do, they may pay a stiff price” (p. xiii). If the stakes are high, especially for those who are competent to do their work independently, students do not feel they need to work with peers. Johnson et al. (2007, p. 23) talk about “individual accountability” as one of the five conditions required for successful collaborative learning to take place.

There are a number of ways to assess pair or group work which would ensure individual accountability. For example, Boud et al. (2001, pp. 74-77) discuss several assessment types, including: incorporating individual assessment in some elements in the collective task; making the collective assessment the sum of individual members’ assessments; negotiating some part of the assessment among the group members, depending on the nature of the task and each member’s individual involvement. A key requirement for designing good, collaborative tasks is that students will perceive them as fair and that they will not demotivate each individual’s contribution.

### **Collaborative learning in Japanese language teaching**

There is a lot of collaboration and interaction in pair and group work in the regular language classroom, in which students help each other as co-learners to develop their language proficiency. Beyond these normal interactive classroom activities, the concept of collaborative learning has been further advocated and practised in recent years in the Japanese language classrooms at tertiary level in both Australia and Japan. In Australia, the concept of social constructivism is embraced, with collaborative learning designed to foster a “community of practice” (Thomson, 2008, 2014, 2016). In Japan, on the other hand, the main objectives of incorporating a collaborative task in tertiary Japanese language education are focused around language acquisition while at the same time fostering positive interdependence. To take some examples, Arita (2004), Oshima (2009), and Sagawa and Shu (2008) discuss a “jigsaw” learning activity in a Japanese language course, a type of collaborative learning in which the role for each member of a group is specifically assigned.<sup>4</sup> Tateoka (2005, 2007) reports on a collaborative mode of learning for mutually improving reading. Use of peer response for correcting each other’s composition has been practised often (see, for example, Harada, 2006; Ikeda, 2004, 2007; Kageyama, 2000; Oshima, Oba, Iwata, & Ikeda, 2012; Tanaka, 2005). Kim (2005) reports on improving speech performance through peer reflection in a Japanese language course.

In none of these studies, however, is there clear evidence to suggest that collaborative learning is also used to develop the higher order thinking skills discussed above. As it takes years to learn a foreign language, it is especially important for foreign language learners at the tertiary level to develop a positive

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<sup>3</sup> See also O’Donnel and O’Kelly (1994) for comprehensive discussion of potential problems in various approaches in collaborative learning.

<sup>4</sup> See Aronson (1978) for detailed discussion of “jigsaw learning.”

sense that they are capable of reflecting on the language they are studying and discussing it intellectually, rather than limiting their perception of themselves to that of simply language apprentices throughout the entire process.

### **Research questions**

How do students respond to a language task that would engage them in higher order analytical skills, and how do they respond to the collaborative mode of learning incorporated into such a task in which they would need their peer's effort in achieving their own academic outcomes? Specifically:

Does the task allow students to see themselves as scholars of language and creators of knowledge, rather than merely language apprentices? In particular, does it help them develop awareness of their intellectual maturity and exercise their skills of critical enquiry and reflection, appropriate in a tertiary environment?

Does the task help students to recognise their peers as both scholars of language and creators of knowledge?

Does the task successfully accommodate students of different levels of language proficiency in collaborative work? In particular, does it avoid the problems, recognised in the literature, of students with higher language proficiency or academic calibre feeling that they are paying a "stiff price" and students with weaker language proficiency or academic calibre getting a "free ride"?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **The context and the learning task**

The course in which this task was trialed is a third-year Japanese linguistics course, a language-enriched conceptual course at the author's institution. Students in the "linguistics" pathway have to complete this course as part of the requirements of a Japanese major. This course provides an ideal environment to develop synergy between learning Japanese and being reflective about the target language. However, it was expected that there would be gaps in the Japanese language proficiency between students, gaps that would be likely to hinder any reciprocal contribution between a pair or in a group.

The topic of the module in which students carried out the task was "language variation," in particular, relating to variation in politeness in Japanese according to factors such as the gender of the speaker, their relationship to the interlocutor, the context in which they were speaking, and so on. Using a TV drama script as stimulus material, students were asked to examine a range of linguistic and non-linguistic devices that reflect language variation in the light of what is discussed in previous literature. There were four key rationales for designing this task:

(a) Linguistic devices that reflect social expectations and interpersonal considerations are often introduced in intermediate to advanced courses.

However, in a foreign language teaching situation outside of Japan, these items tend to stay as knowledge of the language rather than forming a ready-to-use system of sociolinguistic strategies. One of the learning outcomes of the course was that students be able to put these otherwise isolated items of knowledge together and contextualise them in meaningful social situations.

(b) The task took advantage of what some of the students were already doing and enjoying outside the class; that is, watching Japanese TV dramas. The use of films and TV dramas in language learning has been advocated and found effective over many decades. It is argued that such activities motivate language learning and aid students in acquiring pragmatically appropriate uses of language. For example, Allan (1985, p. 73) argues that what may appear to be isolated linguistic items in the classroom are contextualised to “convey messages” in such media. Allan also points out the benefits of access to visual information, such as facial expressions and gestures. Washburn (2001, p. 22) notes the wealth of sociolinguistic factors presented in dramatic situations and even argues for the benefits for learners of the scripted language of TV dramas compared to spontaneous language (see also, Ismaili, 2013; Lonergan, 1984; Rings, 1986; Rose, 2001). This more controlled type of language has been used to support a wide range of aspects of language learning.<sup>5</sup>

Use of feature films, manga, *anime*, and TV dramas for Japanese language education has also been discussed and practised (see, for example, Doi 1997; Hosaka & Gertz-Misumi, 2010; Kato, 2003; Kishida et al., 2012; Komuro-Lee, 2009; Kubota, 2004, 2006; Nishikuma, 2006; Yoshimura, 2010). Komuro Lee (2009), for example, used a film and a TV drama for her upper intermediate level students for increasing their awareness of discourse particles and verbal forms that sensitively reflect the social and personal relationships between interlocutors. Using a film in a lower advanced-level course, Ōkawa (2006) reports on the teaching of Japanese cultural items. Minagawa (2016) reports on students’ insightful analyses of a TV drama script.

(c) The vocabulary and grammar of the Japanese language are usually a target of acquisition in Japanese language courses. However, in this task, language material was used, instead, as the object of analysis, giving students a perspective on elements such as vocabulary and grammar that was slightly removed from the one they are used to.

(d) The task gave students a chance to experience some of the key benefits of collaborative learning. A collaborative learning principle was incorporated into the task by including a requirement that students needed one of their peers’ interim findings on the stimulus material in order to complete the final phase of the task. In order for that to happen, the task was divided into two phases: a brief oral presentation and a 1500 word written report, both produced in English.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Danan (2004) for listening skills, Webb (2010) for vocabulary, Webb and Rodgers (2009) for vocabulary with subtitles, Van Lommel, Laenen and d’Ydewalle (2006) for grammar, Herron, York, Corrie, and Cole (2006) for grammar and listening, and Ismaili (2013) for communication skills.



In the first phase students examined the language use of one of the main characters in the TV drama in light of the norms of language use described in Niyekawa (1988). A transcript of key excerpts from the first episode was made available to all students. Students were free to choose any five situations from the transcript to focus on in their analysis. They reported their findings to the rest of the class in a brief, five-minute, oral presentation. The second phase of the task was to compare their own findings with those made by a peer on the other main character of the opposite gender so that they could discuss whether language use and variation differed across gender in comparable situations in the stimulus material. Students used the findings of their peer as a “previous study,” in addition to Niyekawa’s discussion. Students were allowed to choose any peer’s oral presentation that would complement and support their own analysis. Both the interim oral presentation and the final written work were assessed individually.

The task design is an adaptation of a type of collaborative mode of “jigsaw” learning activity, where each member of a group is assigned a specific task (Aronson, 1978) and the “working together” concept in this task was loosely interpreted. The conventional practice of face-to-face collaboration was compromised in order to increase individual accountability. However, the spirit of collaboration was evident in the task design as one could not complete the final written work without the help of the preliminary work of a peer. Leading up to the oral presentation, time was allocated in class to ask questions to each other and the teacher about the material they were analysing. After the students chose which peer’s work to use, they were also invited to talk to the peer for any clarification needed in the process of completing their written report.

### **Evaluation**

The learning task was evaluated in two aspects. First was to evaluate whether and in what ways students responded to the task by exercising their skills of critical enquiry and reflection, appropriate in a tertiary environment. Second was to evaluate how students perceived the collaborative component of the task in which they needed to draw on their peer’s work to achieve their own academic outcomes.

Participants in the evaluation and the data sources are described below.

### **Participants**

All 25 students in this course had completed or were concurrently enrolled in a third-year Japanese language course. They all had also completed a second-year Japanese linguistics course, a pre-requisite of this course.

All students gave a presentation on their interim findings and submitted a final report. However, only 11 of the students agreed to give written feedback.<sup>6</sup> The Japanese language proficiency of the 11 respondents varied.

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<sup>6</sup> Those students’ consent was sought in accordance with the Human Ethics Committee requirements of the University of Auckland (Ref. 014728)

### Data sources

The first data source used to evaluate the students' responses to the learning task was the students' work itself; that is, the interim findings and final reports produced by all 25 students in the class. The calibre of students' analytical efforts demonstrated in these assessment tasks will be discussed briefly in the following section (under the heading *Creators of knowledge*). The evaluation of this aspect is more fully discussed in Minagawa (2016).

The second data source was the written comments from 11 students in response to an open-ended question. The question simply asked students for their "thoughts on having done the task, with particular reference to using a fellow student's work to enhance your work."<sup>7</sup> The question was deliberately made as open as possible to let students generate their own perceptions in their response. Their perceptions provided an understanding of how they experienced the process (see Van Rossum & Schenk, 1984). The content of their written comments was analysed in light of the themes relevant to the research questions and, more generally, to collaborative learning. The findings from this data source are relevant to all three sub-sections of the results and discussion below.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Creators of knowledge

The task challenged students' analytical abilities. Students were able to stand back and use their higher order thinking skills to reflect on the language itself and on their own understandings of the language on an intellectual level. They examined the language as the object of analysis rather than the object of acquisition. The process thus backgrounded the differing language proficiencies among students and foregrounded the exercise of their mature analytical faculty.

Overall, the students' analyses were of a high standard. Some insightful analyses came from students who were not necessarily strong language students. In the first phase of the task, students reported that language variation and non-linguistic behaviours observed in the TV drama did generally conform to the perceived language norms described in Niyekawa (1988). Students were also astute to notice diversions from anticipated norms and developed interesting discussions on these. In the second phase of the task students were able to incorporate their peers' findings effectively to develop their own comparison of language use across gender. Some even discussed the influence of contemporary social conditions on some examples of language use that diverged from the norms suggested in Niyekawa (1988), written a few decades ago. With their maturity as consumers of TV dramas in general, students were also aware of the artificial dramatic licence of the language of the script and were cautious about the fact that the examples they examined may not necessarily represent a reflection of realistic contemporary use of the language.

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<sup>7</sup> An additional open-ended question was asked about the students' experience of using a TV drama as stimulus material. This question and students' responses to it are not included here, as these are not relevant to the research questions for this paper. See Minagawa (2016) for discussion.

By exercising and demonstrating their intellectual maturity, students were able to see themselves as scholars of the target language rather than just passive language learners. Such realisation would have been especially beneficial and meaningful for students who perceived themselves as not strong language students but who were able to exercise their intellectual maturity in talking about the Japanese language.

The different proficiency levels of students, however, were not completely irrelevant in achieving this linguistic task. Although the task was controlled in many aspects so that all students should be able to exercise their analytical thinking, (e.g., students were already familiar with types of linguistic items they were examining; they were given transcripts of the dialogues of the scenes they were to examine; the questions they needed to answer were specific; and the two assessment pieces were written in English), the language of the material used for analysis was authentic even though it was scripted. Thus, while students enjoyed dealing with the material, some students felt it was challenging. The time allocated during a class for asking questions to each other was not used efficiently as most students did not work on the material until closer to the date of their interim findings presentations.

#### **Students' perceptions of collaborative learning**

Not only a sense of satisfaction was felt from seeing themselves as scholars of the target language, but also, through the collaborative component in the task, they were given an opportunity to see their peers as also producers of knowledge rather than simply as peer apprentice language learners.

From the feedback collected, the overall reception of the collaborative aspect of the project was positive. One student wrote:

Referencing a classmate is not something that I've encountered before in my time at University, but I thought that it was a novel idea with *real world benefits*.<sup>8</sup>

Slavin (1991, p. 80) argues that an important concept in cooperative learning is "to take one another's learning seriously." Aronson (1978, p. 39) suggests that listening to student peers is one of the integral parts of a jigsaw (cooperative) classroom: "[I]f the students are not listening attentively to each other they are not going to be able to learn what the other students are trying to teach." The process forced students to pay attention to other students' work, thus enhancing each other's relevance to one another:

The lecturer encouraged us to use a fellow student's work to enhance our work and I think that was a great idea because that *made us more concentrated on others' presentations* in order to decide which the best to use in our report was.

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<sup>8</sup> All of the emphasis in the students' accounts was added by the author.

In a normal language class, students who are more competent in their language may not benefit much from listening to those who are not strong language learners. However, because analysis and discussion was the focus of the learning task, regardless of the language proficiency level of the presenters, interesting analyses attracted peers' attention and stimulated each other's learning. The fact that the different levels of proficiency were less relevant in sharing their ideas made it easier for the collaborative spirit to flourish.

Below is the discussion of students' experiences in detail in light of three specific benefits of collaborative learning: (a) developing positive interdependence, (b) widening each other's views and reassessing their own, and (c) learning to challenge established knowledge as unquestionable authority.

*a. Developing positive interdependence*

O'Donnell and O'Kelly (1994, p. 330) explain that, in the social cohesion framework, "positive interdependence" is expected to develop from the sense of group identification and concern for others." However, in a collaborative learning situation, high achievers may feel that they are not provided scaffolding by weaker students. When their grade for the course is at risk due to having to rely on someone else's work, this could create resistance.

In her response to the open-ended question, one student noted that she had felt quite apprehensive at the beginning when she found that she would have to depend on another student's work. She is quite a capable student and is used to consistently producing work of a very high standard, so having to produce something using a resource that fell outside her own control was of considerable concern to her:

I did initially dread the assignment a bit, as my work style had been one where I relied on myself and my own efforts. Having been told that we had to rely on another student's work was *pure horror*. I didn't know the capacity and how this elusive other student's work would impact mine, nor did I know whether this other student's work would be up to a standard that I deemed on par with mine. As snobbish and self-righteous as that sounds, *I was clearly not comfortable with hinging my assignment grades on someone else's work.*

Her initial "pure horror," however, was completely erased later in the process, as she appreciated the standard of work produced by her classmates:

However, as everyone presented their work, I had clearly underestimated the calibre of my classmates. No doubt, some did not surprise me at all, but more people exceeded my expectations ....

This task involved a very limited version of the mutual and reciprocal nature of collaborative learning, as students could choose to use a peer's work without actually working with them directly. Nevertheless, some sense of group identification as a whole class was felt among the students:

The fact that *the class grew close* was also a perk of the whole project, as a good report did not just rely on one's own analysis, but also on what one doesn't see that others can, increasing and widening one's own understanding of the concepts presented in the course and applying them.

Students not only benefited from using a peer's work for their final report but also this requirement created an opportunity among them to be *interested* in others' work in the process in general and may have contributed to cultivating such a sense of interdependence. Even if what one presented for the oral presentation was not adopted by a peer, each student worked towards the first phase, with the intention that their work might help their peers to complete their final report.

However, like any face-to-face collaborative work, there was an imbalance of contribution in the process: the interim work of students who demonstrated higher standards of analysis was selected by many and work by some other students was not used by their peers at all (this did not necessarily reflect the level of language proficiency of students). Whether the fact that one's own work was not chosen by any peers demotivated that student or not needs to be investigated further. However, none of the respondents mentioned this as an issue for them.

*b. Widening each other's views*

Boud et al. (2001, p. 8) argue that interchange between peers fosters critical reflection and reassessment of views to a greater extent than interaction with only the teacher and that "challenges to existing ways of thinking" are more likely to arise. Blumenfeld et al. (1996) echo this claim of the effect of collaborative learning: "Students benefit when they share ideas, accommodate other's perspectives" as well as sometimes "reconcile points of view" (p. 38).

What resonated most strongly in students' experiences in this course was how they found different views offered by their peers helped to widen their own views. The nature of the task made it possible for students to interpret the meaning of some of the linguistic choices by the characters in a drama:

I found the ability to cite my classmate's work in my report useful for taking a *completely different perspective* on the project. I was more aware of the assumptions I was making and I was able to look at my analysis in ways I would not have without looking at her work.

This exposes one to *different points of view* and interpretations of something you are familiar with.

At first it seemed unnatural, as I would have chosen slightly different examples to what my [classmate] had, but I suppose it was a good exercise to focus my research in a *different direction to my natural inclination*.

The process of recognising others' views as being valid helped these respondents acknowledge and respect their peer as a creator and contributor of knowledge, just as themselves.

The questionnaire did reveal, however, that at least some students had mutually arranged to use the work of a certain classmate from the beginning, which the teacher was not aware of. As not everyone in the class knew each other, these students might have felt more comfortable to agree to use a work of a peer that they knew. However, opting for a familiar and comfortable way, they may have lost the opportunity to work with the analytical insights of other students and would have lost the opportunity to expand their perspectives.

*c. Perceiving "knowledge" as a social artifact*

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills that is fostered in higher education. Students are trained to read literature critically, construct their own view in response and argue for it. This practice was viewed afresh as a result of the experience of this task. Two students' eye-opening experiences are eloquently told below:

I also liked the ability to cite my classmate's work as a way to become *more comfortable with academic references* - understanding that another human being came up with this analysis and that is *both worthy of respect and open to question*. It helped lower the barriers of academia when as students we can be intimidated by the authority of published authors and hesitate to question their conclusions.

Most assignments would have you refer back to *authorities* on the subject at hand and make one think about how their findings and general rules are applied in the situation you are currently examining. This is an indispensable skill, but having to refer to a classmate's work on the same subject allows you to *instantly compare ideas within the same context*.

As noted earlier, Bruffee (1987, p. 649) argues that one of the benefits of collaborative learning at tertiary level is to gain awareness that knowledge is a social artifact which is fluid, can be challenged, and can be changed. The accounts above suggest that this mode of learning opened students' eyes to the challengeable nature of perceived knowledge and authority.

**Individual assessment, freedom within collaboration**

Assessment of collaborative work requires careful consideration so that while it encourages collaborative contribution, individual accountability is still ensured. Although it may be partly combined with individual assessment, some level of collective assessment is usually assumed in a collaborative task. In this regard, Boud et al. (2001, p. 75) state their concern that "students are used to being judged in terms of their own efforts and can resent others gaining credit for what they perceive as their own contributions, particularly within the context of a competitive course." The assessment in this task, however, followed a conventional, individual type. There was thus less chances for students to experience a sense of resentment or unfairness as each individual's efforts were

credited to their names throughout. Not only was each individual's work assessed separately but, if a student's work was used by their peer to benefit that peer's work, their individual effort was credited and acknowledged as a "previous study;" that is, their individual intellectual property was protected and recognised. There was no merging of individuals' efforts in the final written report nor in the interim oral presentation.

The design of the task also gave students control over the outcome as they were allowed to choose a peer's work which they thought could support and enhance their own work. Respondents clearly valued this autonomy:

At the end of the day, I had a selection of works to choose from, and that relieved my stress levels substantially. *From there, it was back on me to produce a good piece of work - something I could more readily handle.*

Not being made to form a pair with someone from the beginning avoided a possible "free ride" from one party.

It helped, of course, that I *was able to choose a student* whose research was along *similar lines to mine* and which I thought was well done. If I had been automatically paired with a random student I may have found it *more challenging to adapt their ideas to my own.*

The design allowed individual accountability and acknowledgement of individuals' work. However, while each student benefited from another's work, the contribution only worked one way and it was not mutual. As mentioned earlier, this allowed imbalance of contribution as not everyone's effort in the interim presentation was utilised by others. The balance between mutual contribution and individual accountability in this task needs to be further considered.

It is emphasised in the literature that students need to be prepared to understand what is expected in collaborative endeavour. Blumenfeld et al. (1996, p. 38) maintain that not only do students have to be trained in "how to help effectively" but they also need to know "how to ask questions that identify their problems, or they may be unable to make use of help they receive." In this task, the type of help students needed to seek was specific and the times they should seek help was made clear. The design thus required less need for organisation on the students' part and less training for collaboration than might occur in other types of collaborative learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

Practices of collaborative learning in the Japanese language classroom reported in recent years at tertiary level are generally focused on the acquisition of language through collaborative work. This paper reported on a coursework task in a Japanese linguistics course that embraced aspects of collaborative learning that are not usually practised in the Japanese language learning situations; that is, developing skills to critically reflect on the Japanese language itself and to

recognise fellow students as creators of knowledge, regardless of their language proficiency.

The study recognises that there are several issues still to be considered to improve the task design. Nevertheless, through exercising, demonstrating, and sharing their analytical faculty, students became peer scholars of this foreign language rather than being merely apprentices practising language skills. The jigsaw type task design did not require students to work together directly. However, it helped students develop a spirit of collaboration as each needed a peer's help in completing their own final report. The task not only gave students an opportunity to open their eyes to their peers' views but also required them to take different views seriously in order to complete the final phase. To use their peers' work as a previous study helped some students learn that knowledge is a social construct and that it can be challenged. Students' interest in the work of others, primarily for their own academic outcomes, seems to have enhanced the morale of the class as a community of learning.

The design of the task prevented a possible "free ride" by some students, which can sometimes occur in the process of group work. Students with higher analytical skills, though not necessarily higher language proficiency, were not inhibited from exercising their skills to the fullest and their effort was acknowledged if their peers cited their work. Rather than being paired up to work towards the final goal, the freedom given to students to choose a peer's findings that were relevant to their own goal gave them a more comfortable space to work in. Thus, both independent and interdependent learning were experienced. The balance between mutual contribution while allowing individual accountability in the design of this task do, however, need to be further explored.

The main limitation of the study is that it was only trialed in a single course, in a single institution. The size of the sample was also very limited. More trials would be necessary to develop the kind of collaborative experience that this task was intended to facilitate. Another major limitation of the study is that the course in which this task was implemented was a language-enriched Japanese linguistics course and not a regular language course. It was easier to devise a task that requires a substantial amount of analytical thinking in a course of this kind. It would be ideal if one could find a strategy to create a similar experience in a more typical language classroom situation at tertiary level. It is hoped that more studies will address this issue and start a dialogue as to how, through adding another dimension to collaborative learning experiences, students of a foreign language can develop a self-image that they are independent mature adult thinkers even if their capacity to express themselves is only developing in that target language.

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