

Cooperative learning for language acquisition: Developing students' group cohesion to enhance their motivation to communicate in English

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Key Words : Cooperative Learning, Group Cohesion, Willingness to Communicate

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions were forced to drastically change their systems from traditional face-to-face lessons to online teaching. After several years of transition, many university classes in Japan are back to face-to-face teaching, although online education is still playing an important role in the field of language study. Universities have developed various new techniques and implemented different ideas for new styles of teaching, which have presented us with both the benefits and disadvantages of online education. Although the flexibility of time provided through this style of classes could improve students' self-facilitation skills and the efficiency of their learning (Alodwan, 2021; Fang, 2020), online classes have many obstacles, including the lack of access to the network, technological limitations, and some privacy issues (Ivone et al., 2020). And most importantly, interactions between classmates and teachers could easily be hindered behind the screens, besides the fact that some must deal with the new technical challenges of connecting through the Internet. Swain (1995) famously implied that interactions, output, and timely feedback are crucial elements for L2 development. Online environments are not providing learners with enough opportunities to work together, which could contribute to their social isolation (Alodwan, 2021). Dörnyei (1997) indicated that physical closeness is a factor in enhancing affiliation, while Johnson and Johnson (1999) also stated that face-to-face promotive interaction is one of the basic elements of cooperation. Online learning has created challenges for students to connect with others and build a community, which is a crucial element for their well-being in school, especially in college, where students start to become independent

of their families.

In addition, online education could negatively affect students' motivation toward learning, as Fang's research (2020) with 94 Chinese students implied that students' enthusiasm to participate in the class had decreased because they were not able to have enough time or opportunities to communicate and discuss with other students in their online learning. In fact, motivating students to learn a language in a college in Japan itself had already been a challenge even before the pandemic. Students do not often have a clear goal of studying English after passing the phase of cramming for university entrance exams. Also, non-English majors usually meet only once a week in most required language courses, and many of the students are busy working or commuting long distances. These facts might have prevented them from having enough quality time with their classmates to build a strong community in a college environment. Adding online challenges to this already unfavorable situation might have a negative impact on their academic performance and emotional health. After experiencing the pandemic, it has become even more important to provide the best for the learners' communication needs, and to promote their well-being is now one of the highest priorities for college instructors and authorities. Classrooms can be a safe place to start a conversation and create a lifelong relationship; online education during this unusual era has again shed light on this issue.

Currently, many university classes in Japan are back to "normal", in-person styles, but to make the most of what was learned during the online struggle, this research focuses on developing the learners' group cohesion and motivation through cooperative learning. It also aims to explore effective ways to implement the techniques of cooperative group work both in online and face-to-face settings in universities.

This report principally presents a part of the author's action research conducted in a required English course at a private university during the spring semester of 2022. The focused class was an English reading course for students in non-English-related majors, which was one of the required language classes for them to earn the necessary credit for their aimed degree. The class met once a week and consisted of 38 individuals. The main objective of this study was to find ways to support university students in creating rapport, building a safe community, and motivating them to learn and use English more. To meet these goals, a variety of cooperative learning activities were implemented in the lessons for the students to work together both in person and online. The students' behaviors in cooperative learning were observed; in addition, their perspectives toward group work and the changes in self-assessed English skills were investigated through a series of

questionnaires and several interviews.

Literature Review

Cooperative Learning

According to Johnson et al. (2013), cooperative learning is “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p.3). As mentioned above, interactions between learners are one of the necessary elements of language classes, and when learners work cooperatively, the amount of output allowed per student is much larger than that in traditional teacher-centered classrooms (Kagan, 1995). Kagan (1995) specifically explains that a student could receive half a dozen feedback opportunities within 20 minutes, while he or she is lucky to get one in whole-class, one-at-a-time interaction within the same amount of time. As many language educators are well aware, comprehensible output is an essential part of language acquisition (Swain, 1985). Swain and Lapkin (1995) stated “problems that arise while producing the second language (L2) can trigger cognitive exercises that are involved in second language learning” (p. 371). Thus, to push L2 development, learners need to meet the demands of producing comprehensive output (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Especially because interaction with speakers of English is very limited outside schools in Japan (Yashima et al., 2004), classrooms need to provide learners with numerous opportunities to experience spoken output. Considering that the students in college have at least six years of language input through public education, college environments could focus more on their language interactions. Cooperative learning structures could help boost the chances of learners practicing the utterance, and they play a significant role in promoting student-student communication in class.

In addition to the frequency of the output, High (1993) claimed that a cooperative learning approach can offer a supportive atmosphere that reduces the learner’s fear and increases their willingness to speak. This is a significant benefit for Japanese learners’ language development because the fear of making mistakes can be one of the biggest obstacles when they are working on speaking tasks. In her research focusing on Japanese EFL learners of English, Harumi (2011) demonstrated that over 22 % of the participants expressed psychological reasons to stay silent in class, including a lack of confidence. Japanese students often remain silent when they are not sure whether their answers are correct or if their ideas are different from those of others (Harumi, 2011). Through cooperation, learners develop interpersonal attraction, which promotes caring relationships among each other (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). This supportive atmosphere could help

learners feel less afraid of embarrassment from inaccuracy and less anxious about breaking the “harmony” of the group.

Moreover, Kagan mentioned “the less formal, peer-oriented, expressive use of language in the cooperative group presents language use closer to the identity of many students” (p. 3); that is to say, learners can feel more comparable to themselves speaking in a cooperative setting than in a whole-class environment. Thus, working cooperatively with peers can result in greater psychological health (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), and more opportunities for interactions.

Aside from the benefits on the learners’ psychological well-being, research suggests that cooperative group work can create a positive impact on the learners’ accuracy of speech and academic success as well. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of over 168 studies comparing the efficacy of cooperative and individualistic learning on individual achievement of 18 years or older. The results indicated that cooperative learning promoted higher individual achievement than individualistic learning. They also described that learning cooperatively involves orally explaining problems, discussing the concepts, and teaching one’s knowledge to each other, all of which increase the learners’ output. Additionally, Jacobs and Kimura (2013) explained that students can help each other with comprehension difficulties by speaking in more understandable ways to each other, as one possible benefit of working with peers. Long and Porter (1985) famously laid out several advantages of group work in the second language classroom, not only from pedagogical but also from psycholinguistic perspectives. They argue that a small group conversation improves the quality of student talk because students can engage in cohesive sequences of utterances for a fair amount of time, which helps them develop discourse competence. Thus, in the setting of cooperative groups, students are more involved in the lessons, and it could promote higher motivation to learn, in addition to developing their language abilities.

Cooperative learning can be a powerful approach with numerous benefits for second language acquisition in school. However, instructors should be aware that not all group work can constitute cooperative learning. In their study, Johnson et al. (2002) introduced the five important components that make the activity cooperative. They argued that understanding these five components is necessary to elicit the best possible outcome from the activity (Johnson et al., 2002).

- 1) Positive interdependence
- 2) Individual accountability

- 3) Face-to-face promotive interaction
- 4) Social skills
- 5) Group processing

Similarly, Kagan (2013) presented the four basic principles of cooperative learning:

- 1) Positive interdependence
- 2) Individual accountability
- 3) Equal participation
- 4) Simultaneous Interaction

Among those elements, the first two of each study are identical and can be considered the most crucial, which are also often emphasized in other research (e.g. Anderson, 2019; McCafferty et al., 2006).

The first of the essential concepts is *positive interdependence*. According to Johnson and Johnson (1999), it is “the perception that we are linked with others in a way so that we cannot succeed unless they do” (pp.70-71), while Kagan (2013) and Anderson (2019) describe that, in cooperative activities, students work together to achieve a shared goal as a team. Moreover, learners “feel that their outcomes are positively correlated with those of their group mates” (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013, p.25) in a cooperative task. Thus, even if students are seated in a group and working on the same assignment together, it is not a cooperative activity unless they are in a situation in which no one can complete the task without the help of others (Kagan, 2013).

The second is *individual accountability*. This concept describes the notion that “group success depends on contributions from all group members” (Anderson, 2019, p.9). Namely, each student needs to encourage others to participate and share their ideas and skills, while they hold the responsibility in their own role and learning for contributing to the group (Anderson, 2019; Jacobs & Kimura, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Sometimes in group work, it happens that a few active students do all the work while others might be off the task. This situation cannot be considered cooperation even if the task itself is completed in a group. This common issue of group work could be avoided when students acknowledge the important principles and benefits of working together. Cooperative group work following the concepts also creates a feeling of safety and boosts motivation and effort to learn because encouragement and support students can receive from other members help reduce anxiety and make them pay more attention to others (Kagan, 2013). Incorporating cooperative

learning in a classroom would be highly beneficial, if not necessary, considering these previous studies.

¹ Group Cohesion (Cohesiveness)

While cooperative learning has significant advantages in classrooms, to make it effective, educators need to be considerate of *Group Dynamics*, which is explained as “the actions, processes, and changes that occur within groups and between groups” (Forsyth, 2014, p.2). Group dynamics has been an area of focus in the field of social psychology, which concerns the scientific analysis of groups, including group formation, development, interaction patterns, and group cohesion (Clement et al., 1994; Dörnyei, 1997; Forsyth, 2014; Matsubara, 2007). Dörnyei (1997) stated that some of the important notions of group dynamics, such as group characteristics and group processing, “significantly contribute to success or failure in the classroom and directly e[af]fect the quality of learning within group” (p. 485). Paying attention to the aspects of group dynamics is crucial for modern language education because the communicative approach often requires group tasks with active interactions among students, which would be very difficult to achieve if students do not like or talk with each other. (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003)

In particular, several researchers argue that among the variables in group dynamics, *Group Cohesion (Cohesiveness)* is one of the most important elements for learners’ success in cooperative learning (e.g., Dörnyei, 1997; Chang, 2010). According to Forsyth (2014), group cohesion refers to “the solidarity or unity of a group resulting from the development of strong and mutual interpersonal bonds among members” (p.10). Similarly, Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) implied that group cohesiveness is related to closeness and a feeling of being a part of a group; they stated that students “participate in group-activities willingly and are happy to cooperate with each other” (p.63) as one of the positive features of cohesive groups. Indeed, in their meta-analysis, Evans and Dion (2012) found that group cohesion and group performance are positively correlated, whereas research by Clement et al. (1994) with 301 secondary school students in Budapest demonstrated the associations between group cohesion and learners’ positive evaluation of the learning environment. In their study, the students assessed their attitudes, motivations, and anxiety toward English learning, as well as their perception of classroom atmosphere and cohesion. Its correlational analysis revealed a considerable correlation between a positive perception of the learning environment and cohesion; namely, group cohesion is a crucial element for students’ emotional well-being in a classroom.

This perspective also suggests that group cohesion can increase students’ learning

motivation and performance. Chang (2010) indicated that there was a moderate correlation between group cohesion and students' level of motivation through questionnaires and interviews with Taiwanese students majoring in English. Furthermore, Cao and Philp's (2006) investigation showed that group cohesion can influence learners' *Willingness to Communicate* (WTC), in which eight international students studying English in New Zealand participated in answering a series of WTC questionnaires and individual interviews. Fifty percent of the participants expressed that *familiarity with interlocutor* and *interlocutor participation* were major factors influencing their WTC in class, and they explained that "the more distant the relationship of the individual to the receiver(s), the less willing the individual is to communicate" (Cao & Philps, 2006, p. 488). The cohesion of the class can help not only the group task to be accomplished well but also boost the motivation of individual learners.

Thus, the possible impact of group cohesion must be considered as a vital component when implementing cooperative activities. In Japan, most universities offer only one class meeting per week for a language course with a relatively large number of individuals. Unlike in a typical junior high or high school context, each learner may have a different language learning background and goals for learning after they are out of the entrance exam preparation phase. These facts can result in less cohesion in class, besides that students have just met and are not necessarily friends with each other yet. High (1993) stated that when learners feel closer to their peers, they feel less anxious when speaking the second language; cohesion can reduce fear. Therefore, building strong group cohesion between learners and creating a safe and comfortable atmosphere are particularly significant for language classrooms in Japanese universities.

Giving learners enough opportunities to get to know each other and helping them build close rapport should be one of the highest priorities in class for successful language learning. Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) suggested that "the amount of time the parties have known each other is a powerful factor to solidify and stabilize the relations" (p. 67). Also, Dörnyei (1997) states that learners gradually develop stronger ties while fostering cohesiveness by sharing genuine personal information. Encouraging learners to ask questions about each other could allow them to develop cohesiveness; also, learning each other's names and sharing some positive personal experiences could be a great help in building positive relationships between learners (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Helgesen, 2019). In addition, there are several studies introducing techniques to build cohesion; Aubrey (2011) recommended some activities to boost students' cohesion in his study, such as student-student interviews focusing on understanding each student's positive trait, as well as group reflection time on the members' contributions. Jacobs and Kimura (2013) also introduced some team-building activities,

including a task in which learners take turns sharing their surprising facts, based on the principle theories of cooperative learning.

In the views of the research above, group tasks should be carefully planned and prepared to ensure they require cooperation; at the same time, we must first remember to prioritize building cohesion among learners by providing opportunities to work together for a sufficient amount of time in class. Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) stated that “in a ‘good’ group, the L2 classroom can turn out to be such a pleasant and inspiring environment that the time spent there is a constant source of success and satisfaction for teachers and learners alike” (p.3). This positive perception of the learning environment could also enhance students’ attendance to classes, and it is an important factor for students’ academic success, particularly in college. Thornton et al.’s (2020) study of 107 college first-year students majoring in sports and exercise categories in England revealed that the students’ attendance was affected by their group cohesion. The score of the participants’ group cohesion was positively correlated with attendance in the two semesters, and the correlation effect size increased in the second semester. As they became familiar with each other, they participated more. That is to say, having good relationships with classmates can attract students to take part in class more, which could possibly prevent them from isolation and ultimately support their well-being, as well as help their academic success. All the above considerations indicate that appropriate cooperation with good group cohesion can create numerous benefits in the learners’ success in language learning and their adequate college experiences.

¹The two terms, Group Cohesion and Group Cohesiveness, are used to refer to the same aspect. Group Cohesion is used in the following parts of this paper.

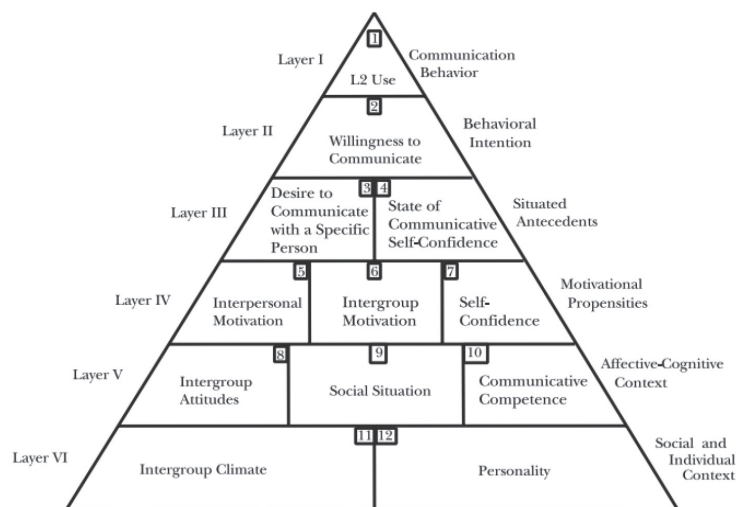
Willingness to Communicate

In Japan, opportunities to interact in English do not occur automatically when learners are out of the classroom (Yashima et al., 2004). Furthermore, due to the overly highlighted study for entrance exams, which often neglects the elements of spoken output, producing the language for communication purposes has been challenging for many Japanese learners of English. Because of this lack of frequent language exposure to other language communities and immediate communication needs in English, the improvement of the learners’ communicative skills in English can depend on their willingness to seek out or take advantage of the opportunities to communicate in English both in and outside schools (Yashima, 2010). As demonstrated in research, communicative language ability develops through communication (Lee & Van Patten, 2003); therefore, enhancing learners’ *Willingness*

to *Communicate* (WTC) should be an important objective for English education in Japan.

The concept of WTC in a foreign language has recently drawn researchers' attention in the field of language learning motivation. This notion was originally developed by McCroskey and associates to describe a person's trait-like predisposition toward initiating communication in his/her first language (L1) when free to do so (McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Baer, 1985; Zakahi & McCroskey, 1989). MacIntyre et al. (1998) applied this idea to the field of the second language (L2) to explain the complex connections of the variables influencing a person's L2 use, while they had had experience encountering some students who are unwilling to use their L2 despite their high grammatical competence, whereas others seek to communicate with only minimal linguistic knowledge. They defined WTC as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547), and research has shown that WTC can be a predictor of the frequency of communication in an L2 (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In their heuristic model of WTC, MacIntyre et al. (1998) illustrated the complex interrelations of potential influences on L2 use, including fairly stable factors such as personality and intergroup attitude, as well as situation-specific ones such as the desire to communicate with a specific person. WTC is placed just under L2 use in the pyramid-shaped model, which indicates that WTC predicts one's actual use of the language, as the ultimate step before an utterance occurs. [Figure 1]

Figure 1
Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing WTC (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, Kimberly, & Noels, 1998)



Yashima and associates (2004; 2016) claim that WTC is particularly important to Japanese learners and potentially has a great impact on developing their practical communication skills. In traditional teacher-centered classrooms in Japan, students are accustomed to being silent. Harumi's (2011) study with 197 Japanese English learners on a first-year English degree course demonstrated that a significant number of the participants expressed problems with turn-taking as a possible reason for their silence in monolingual EFL contexts; some learners think that they should talk only when they are individually nominated. Although silence can be an appropriate behavior in the Japanese context, it could be misinterpreted as showing disinterest, laziness, or even a refusal to participate in some Western cultures (Harumi, 2011). Moreover, Yashima (1995) reported in her research on Japanese high school students studying abroad that many participants found it particularly important, but difficult, to initiate interactions and had a hard time building interpersonal relationships with peers because to establish an equal relationship, "two-way communication is mandatory and the response should be quick and relevant" (p. 98). Taking initiative and making contributions to conversations are essential skills when communicating in English, but apparently, they are very challenging for Japanese learners. Considering these studies, improving learners' WTC should be one of the important purposes to acknowledge in the current English language learning context in Japan, to have students create "voices that reach the world." (Yashima, 2016)

In fact, some researchers have explored ways to enhance Japanese students' WTC in EFL contexts. Matsubara's (2007) research with 237 Japanese college students suggested that the student-centered approach may increase their WTC and interest in different cultures. In her study, she administered a questionnaire to investigate the factors associated with the participants' WTC, and their preference for a student-centered approach significantly corresponded to their WTC scores. Watanabe (2017) investigated 32 Japanese university students' WTC growth through their experiences in a speaking class that focused on exchanging opinions with classmates and the instructor. The participants were told that they were not judged by the accuracy of their speech, but the frequency of their utterances would be included in grading, and the feedback from the instructor was given only on the contents or messages. The participants' WTC significantly improved after the semester, and a large number of students expressed that they felt more comfortable speaking English. Furthermore, Yashima et al. (2016) discovered that, through repeated discussion sessions in small groups every week for a semester at a Japanese university, participants found strategies to initiate turns by asking questions and listening carefully, and the number of turns they took grew considerably. This research also demonstrated that learners tend to

become less nervous through the recursive discussion exercises and take up the challenge of contributing to the talk when teacher control is lifted (Yashima et al., 2016). In order to promote learners' active interactions in English, teachers need to provide enough opportunities for students to communicate with each other, while leaving some responsibility for them to take control of their utterances and interactions. This could help learners feel more confident in their English communication, which significantly affected their WTC growth, as Yashima (2002) demonstrated in her well-known research with 297 Japanese college students learning English.

As these studies suggested, a student-centered approach and frequent student interactions hold immense potential to improve learners' WTC. Additionally, it can help them create their way into the world beyond the classroom environment. The concept of WTC could be an essential component to consider when teaching Japanese learners English.

The three focal elements; cooperative learning, group cohesion, and Willingness to Communicate, are all interrelated and affect one another. In the Japanese college environment, including the aspects and tasks of cooperative learning is highly beneficial for promoting better academic performance and, most importantly, for students' well-being. Furthermore, to maximize cooperation, building group cohesion is essential, if not necessary, and it leads to the learners' higher motivation.

Action Research

Method

During the academic year of 2022, a considerable number of universities in Japan were shifting back to offering face-to-face classes after two years of adapting to online education, although online learning has remained an essential part of language study in the current working environment. This target "reading" class was one of the few courses that completely resumed face-to-face, while the majority of the reading-focused language classes were still offered mostly online, sometimes entirely in an on-demand style, depending on each instructor in this particular university.

To make the most of what was learned during the previous two years, some of the online techniques were used for writing within the process of group activities and follow-up assignments, while the main focus of the lessons was on in-person cooperative activities. Each class provided students with numerous opportunities to communicate with each other through pair/group cooperative tasks. Then, the effects of the series of activities on the learners' perceived abilities, group cohesion, and WTC were examined using the questionnaires, as well as the interviews with several participants.

As explained above, this course was one of the required English classes for non-English majors, and most students in this class this semester were first-year students in the Economics major. Among the 38 students, eight were repeaters in the upper classes, including one individual from the Law department. Students' levels of English in the class varied slightly, although the target level for the class was "elementary," which was considered the second lowest of the four levels in the system of the university (EIKEN pre-2 level/CEFR A1-A2), and the textbook was assigned based on the stated level for this class group. In order to explore the changes in their group dynamics, perceived English abilities, and WTC, questionnaires were administered twice, pre-term and post-term, with approximately a 3-month interval. Moreover, in the post-term questionnaire, specific items were added to learn about the students' experience in detail, while some items were removed due to less relevance to the subject matter. The answers to each questionnaire were collected through online forms, and the participants filled them out voluntarily on their own within the assigned period. The questionnaires were developed through this action research, referring to the previous studies related to this field. The detailed information of each questionnaire is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of the Questionnaires

	Pre-term	Post-term
Time	April	July
No. of participants	30	25
Questionnaire items	-English abilities -Group work attitudes -WTC	-English abilities -Group work attitudes -WTC
Additional focus	-Background information	-Changes in abilities -Class experiences -Free Comments

Note. The number of participants varied because they were asked to submit these questionnaires as voluntary tasks. Some of the items above are excluded from the analysis for this report.

In addition to these questionnaires, from Week 3 through Week 11, participants were asked to fill out a short survey, *Exit slip*, as one of the after-class assignments to know more immediate reactions to what they did and how they felt about the lessons. In particular, the slips focused on the students' group cohesion by asking about their pair and group work

experiences. Every week, students had at least two or three tasks to work on with their classmates, and this series of surveys was conducted especially to see how well they worked together and if their perceptions of group cohesion changed. Also, the reflection on the final group work was included in the post-term questionnaire, so they displayed their perceived cohesion 10 times in total throughout the semester. In addition to the questionnaires, the interviews were conducted with three participants individually approximately a week after the final meeting of the focused class. The cohort consisted of one female and two males, who participated in all the surveys and questionnaires. The interviews were recorded and administered only in Japanese, the participants' L1. Primarily, the participants were asked about their experiences with cooperative activities and group dynamics. The details of the questionnaires, interviews, and their analysis are provided in the *Results* section below.

Cooperative Activities

The main objective of the course on the school curriculum was to help students improve their English comprehension skills to the level that they could pass EIKEN Pre-2. To achieve this objective, the primary focus of the lesson was to introduce English reading strategies and to have students read academic articles with the skills they learned. Although the focal point of each lesson was reading, students spent about 50% to 60% of the class time in pairs or groups, having at least three or four times to talk with a different partner for small talk and discussing ideas about the vocabulary, passage contents, or their opinions on certain topics, with the cooperative learning structure called *RallyRobin* (Kagan, 2013).

Upon completing each unit, once every three weeks, a group-work day was set for students to spend one whole lesson with a few classmates for cooperative group activities. Groups of three or four students were randomly assigned, and they had a group-making activity and worked together to decide on individual roles in the group, as well as a group name based on the idea of *The Same Game* (Jacobs & Kimura, 2013). Also, the highlight of this lesson was the activity called *Missionaries* which was modified by the ideas of Kagan Structures and Japan Association for Study of Cooperation in Education (JASCE). In this activity, students had to do some research or create a paragraph together, and each member had equal responsibility to represent the group during the last part of the session. The details of the tasks and structures introduced above are described in the following section.

RallyRobin

This is one of the major techniques that was often used for the pair-talk type of activity in this course. RallyRobin is the well-known cooperative learning structure that Kagan

introduced, in which students take turns sharing ideas with a partner. (If this is done in a group, it is called *RoundRobin* (Kagan, 1989)). Through this activity, everyone can respond and listen to each other simultaneously in a short amount of time, which is one of the principles of cooperative learning, according to Kagan (2013). In the target class, the students were often placed in pairs to review the story or share ideas in English about some questions the instructor asked. When they were working on RallyRobin tasks, they were required to listen to their partner carefully and to show agreement or appreciation with positive comments, such as saying "Thank you for sharing your ideas" or "I think so, too" before switching roles. Kagan (1989) described that "an approving smile or a positive comment gives us a dose of dopamine, which in turn makes us feel better and perform better" (p.48). Furthermore, another task was frequently added to this main opinion exchange, in which students had to repeat the information that their partners had shared in their own words. By implementing this structure often, students can experience reinforcement every time they talk; thus, RallyRobin was used regularly with the expectation that students would be motivated to speak more.

In addition, based on the principle of this structure, the *Active Review* task was carried out in almost every class. This is a RallyRobin exercise that particularly focuses on the review of their learning contents. In Active Review, students took turns telling each other about what they learned from the passages they read or what part was interesting or surprising. This task sometimes came at the beginning of the class to activate the students' knowledge, or at the end of the unit, aiming to internalize the ideas they learned. JASCE's research emphasizes the importance of reviewing in the process of cooperative learning (2019). It is explained that this review activity should be done by the learners themselves; they can deepen their understanding and feel accomplished through the cooperative reviewing process (JASCE, 2019). Also, Johnson and Johnson (1999) describe that *group processing* is one of the basic elements of cooperation, which encourages learners to review each other's actions and efforts to maintain an effective working relationship. By sharing their learning, students can help each other more and understand the difficulties of others; at the same time, they are able to receive and provide another opportunity to speak and listen to the same topic with each other. This boosts the redundancy of both input and output, which is one of the advantages of cooperative learning (Kagan, 1995)

Team-making Tasks and The Same Game

During the group-work days, students were randomly assigned to groups of three to four people. Because of the limited amount of time that they had spent together under the

COVID-19 measures, most students were not very familiar with each other at the beginning of the semester. Dörnyei (1997) stated that sharing genuine personal information about each other could help learners foster cohesiveness, and considering this theory, the students were given a certain amount of time to get to know each other by casually having a conversation with familiar, but related issues to the unit contents at the beginning of the group work session. Also, to maximize the success of the group work, a small task was always offered to assign a specific role to everyone in the group (e.g. discussion leader, notetaker, and word checker). Having students assign group roles by themselves was also an attempt to promote students' positive interdependence and individual accountability for cooperative tasks. Moreover, different rules for the role assignments were applied every time based on the students' names or some other simple, personal information, such as the alphabetical order of the students' given names and the number of alphabet letters in their names. In addition to fostering the chance to communicate, the main purpose of this additional name-related task is to have students pay attention to each member of their group. Through these procedures, students were often encouraged to learn their classmates' names and become familiar with each other. Another task offered for team-making was The Same Game. This is an exercise modified from the idea of the activity that Jacobs and Kimura (2013) introduced, in which students find the items that all the members like or some common facts about everyone in the group. During team-making, they were also asked to name their group according to the commonality they found. This was applied to help students familiarize themselves with each other, aiming to build cohesion among the groups.

Helgesen (2016) explained the significance of learning the names of students as one element of building a good relationship in class. Furthermore, Cao and Philp's (2006) research suggested that familiarity with the members and participation of members in group work are key factors in developing the learners' WTC, as indicated in the *Literature Review* above. Considering these perspectives, paying attention to team members was regularly promoted as an important element of this lesson segment.

Missionaries

As mentioned above, Missionaries is a cooperative group activity modified by the ideas of Kagan Structures and JASCE. In this activity, students worked together in the original group (home group) creating paragraphs or conducting simple research on certain topics. Then, they were moved to a different group individually, and each shared what they had prepared in the home group with new group members. In this way, everyone was responsible for their group work, and each member could equally participate in the talking

as well as preparing as a representative of a group, contrasting the common problem of group work in which not all the students contribute to the task. One additional task attached to this activity was reporting the group work on the class online chat system individually. Each student had to write a short paragraph about their group and what they did in the group; for example, they reported the information about their team members with roles, as well as the paragraph they made and shared in groups during the class. This could provide opportunities for redundant output (Kagan, 1995), while Lee and VanPatten (2003) also suggested that writing a report works as an important purpose of an information exchange activity, which can be added to the class activity itself. Besides, the students needed to post their reports in the class chat system, so everyone in the class could read each other's writings, which could encourage students to be extra responsible for their words as well as for remembering each other's information and learning from what others wrote.

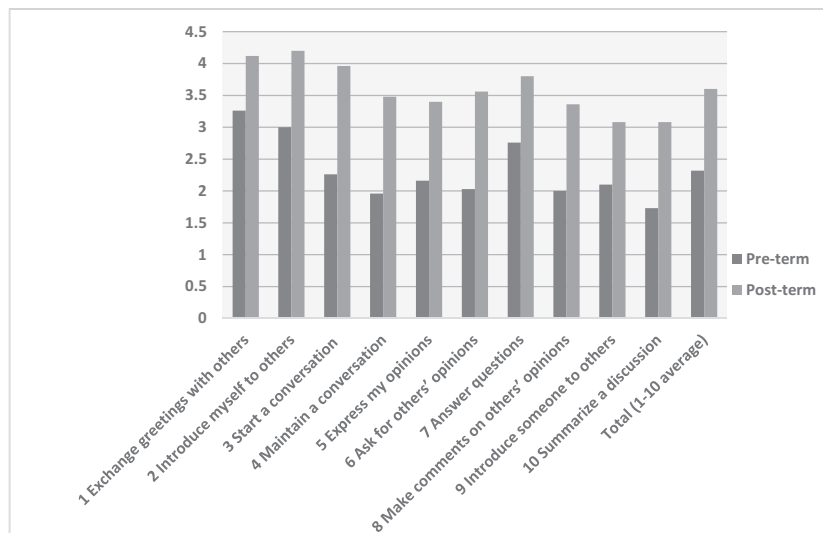
Results

Questionnaires

Self-assessed English Abilities

In both questionnaires, participants were asked to display how well they could perform in each exercise of speaking English, such as *exchange greetings* and *start a conversation*. The average scores of the participants are presented by categories in Figure 2. See Figure 2 for the results at the beginning of the semester and after Week 15.

Figure 2

Perceived English-speaking Abilities

Note. Average scores of target students. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: I can't do it at all. to 5: I can do it well.)

The average scores of all 10 practices improved by over 1.28 points. In particular, participants felt a lot more competent in *start a conversation* and *ask for others' opinions* in the post-term questionnaire. During the semester, students had several chances to talk with at least three or four students at each meeting, and they had opportunities to work in groups during the group-work days, in which they needed to communicate with the members of their home group as well as the new individuals in a second group for Missionaries activity. Often, the students were assigned to finish some tasks within a certain amount of time, so they gradually became accustomed to managing their time, not hesitating to start working in English. To meet all the required goals of the tasks within the given amount of time, students have learned ways to move the procedure forward using English. Also, the basic conversation starters and discussion phrases were always practiced and displayed in class, so students reviewed them constantly during the task. As previous research suggested, initiating a conversation is a difficult but necessary skill to build an interpersonal relationship (Yashima, 1995). Through repeated interactions, the students' confidence in initiating a conversation in English increased fairly; as a result, they were starting to connect and create rapport while working on cooperative tasks.

Similarly, the class involved many chances for turn-taking with the RallyRobin structure, which might have contributed to the growth of the item, *ask for others' opinions*.

Also, the score of the item, *introduce myself to others* reached 4.2 points at the post-term, which can be explained by the fact that self-introduction in English had become a relatively easy task for the students throughout the course, having a conversation with different students every time. They needed to give a very casual self-introduction to every partner they had, and it was done at least three or four times during each 90-minute meeting. This could boost the students' confidence in this element, although it was not the biggest jump compared to other practices.

On the other hand, participants showed the least confidence in the items, *introduce someone to others* and *summarize a discussion*, even at the post-term. The scores were quite low at the beginning, and they were still lower than other components, although they displayed a slight improvement. These features were included mostly in the group-work day lessons, in which the students had to talk about their team and what they created in a different group and online discussions. There was no regular redundancy for this particular activity, and the students were not provided with enough time to practice those features in class. It can be said that they needed more opportunities to become competent in these two elements, which should be an objective for future lessons.

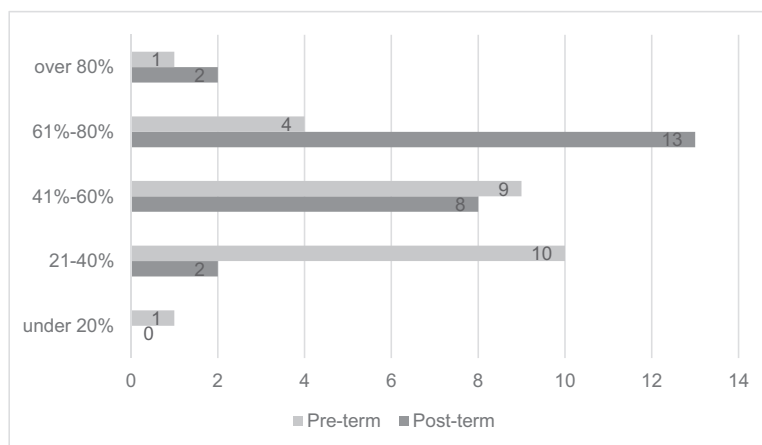
In addition to answering about their specific speaking abilities at two separate times, participants were asked, only at the post-term, to indicate their perceived changes in these two elements; reading comprehension skills and how much they could speak in English during the group work. The results are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Figure 3

Perceived Change in Reading Comprehension Skill

Q. How much did/do you understand the English passages in the textbook (without using any dictionaries)?

*Compare the beginning and the end of the semester.



Post-term (N=25)

Note. The lines show the number of participants who chose the percentage option. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: under 20% to 5: over 80%)

In class, necessary grammar features and new vocabulary were introduced; nevertheless, most of the class time was used for pair and group activities, so detailed explanations of the stories or articles for comprehension were rarely provided to the students. Although most of the comprehension exercises were treated as individual work without much help from the instructor, the students felt that they had become more competent in understanding English passages at the level of the assigned textbook. The majority of the participants considered that they could now comprehend an English article by over 60%, which is a significant improvement compared to the 21% to 40 % understanding at the beginning of the semester.

In addition to reading skills, the participants' perception of their English usage rate in pair and group work increased considerably. Over 10 students out of 25 participants think that they were able to handle a conversation to a certain degree in English, although the majority of them still seemed a little less confident in some types of conversation [See Figure 4]. This might be because some discussions were related to the unit content which could have been new and unfamiliar to some participants. Also, some group tasks involved writing with a time restriction, so students were required to work efficiently, which resulted in

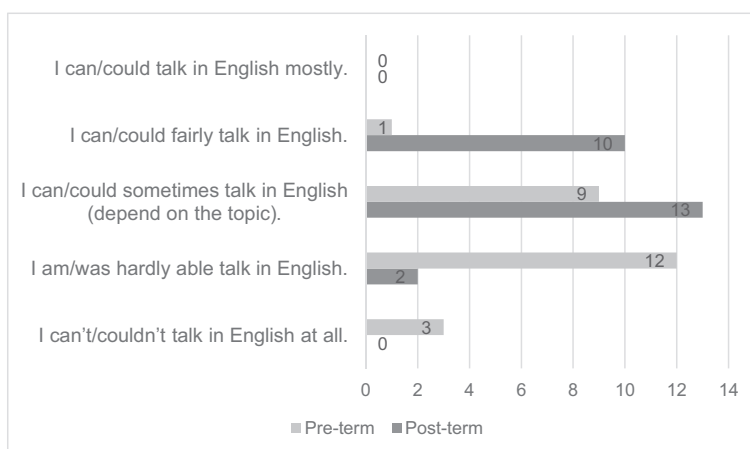
speaking Japanese. In addition, the instructions were always focused more on cooperation, so the use of Japanese was neither prohibited nor discouraged. However, even under this circumstance, where the students were allowed to speak their L1 during the group work, there was a noticeable growth in their perceived English-speaking abilities. This suggests that they tried to practice their English conversations on their own initiative.

Figure 4

Perceived Change in Speaking during Pair/Group Work

Q. How much did/do you speak English in a pair talk and a group discussion in class?

*Compare the beginning and end of the semester.



Post-term (N=25)

Note. The lines show the number of participants who chose the option. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: I can't/couldn't talk in English at all. - 5: I can/could talk in English mostly.)

Willingness to Communicate

The results of the WTC questions in both questionnaires are displayed in Table 2. The items to investigate the participants' WTC were developed through this action research based on several previous studies (e.g. Yashima, 2002; Hashimoto, 2002; and Watanabe, 2013). Participants were asked to demonstrate how willing they were to communicate in English under 6 types of situations, in and outside school, that they might encounter in their everyday lives. The answer choices indicate how often the participants would communicate with the recipient in the specific situations in English or the emotional states that represent their willingness to communicate in English under the given situations (For example, scale 1 shows that the participant would never do that in English, or they are not willing to do it at all).

Table 2*Willingness to Communicate in English in Pre- and Post-Terms*

Situations (If there is a chance to..)	Pre-term	Post-term
1. Talk to a stranger who is in trouble or needs help in a town or at a station	2.63	2.84
2. Talk to a teacher for questions	2.53	3.36
3. Talk with a group of foreigners to guide them to an area or school	2.56	3.12
4. Speak in front of a class	2.33	3.12
5. Talk with an acquaintance you meet by chance	3.06	3.60
6. Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class	2.63	3.28
Total (average)	2.62	3.22

Note. Average scores of target students. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: Never do/I don't want to do that. to 5: Always do/I want to do that.)

Under the situations above, participants' WTC increased with the growth on average by 0.6 points, although the results clearly show that the three classroom-related items have improved more than the others. The biggest boost was the item; *talk to a teacher for questions*, followed by *speak in front of a class* and *talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class*. In particular, even though they did not often have many opportunities to talk with an instructor, their score on item 2 became one of the highest at the post-term. This might be because, through the cooperative activities, the students had become familiar with the instructor as a facilitator, which is not common in a traditional, teacher-centered environment, to the point that they felt less nervous about speaking English with. In contrast, the scores of the three situations outside the classroom were not remarkably high or improved significantly. Nevertheless, considering that the students did not specifically prepare or practice for those public encounters in class, the increased scores show that they became more interested in initiating a conversation even outside the school environment.

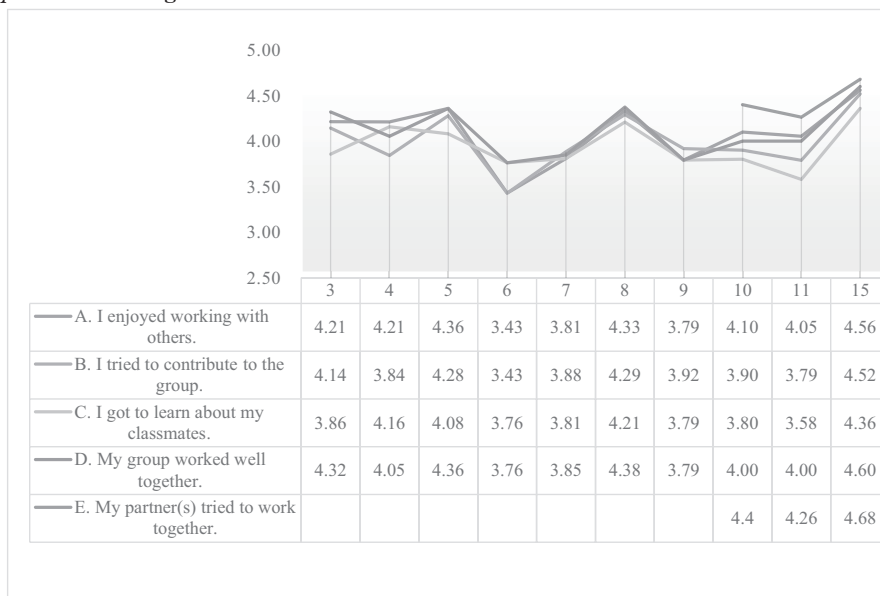
Exit Slip*Group Cohesion*

According to Johnson and Johnson (1999), one of the principles of cooperative learning is *face-to-face promotive interaction*, which had been a big challenge in the online learning situation until the previous year. However, in 2022, the situation changed, and students were able to meet every week in person, so seeing the shift in group dynamics every week was one of the big purposes of this procedure. The Exit slip was distributed 9 times throughout

the semester to investigate the change in the participants' group cohesion; in addition, this cohesion-featured component was also included in the post-term questionnaire as the final data collection for Week 15. The first two weeks and the three weeks before the final project were excluded from the data collection because of several technical and scheduling issues. As a result, the participants' group cohesion data was collected 10 times in total throughout this focus semester. The items on the survey and the detailed results of the group cohesion questions are shown in Figure 5. Item E was added to the list of the questions on the Exit slip after Week 10. Also, as mentioned above, the course offered a group-work day once every three weeks, in which the students were devoted to certain group work over the majority of the class time; therefore, the answers of Weeks 5, 8, 11, and 15 were based on the perceptions of group work, while the results of the other days were more focused on random pair-talk, including small talk and opinion-exchanges related to the unit themes.

Figure 5

Group Cohesion Progress



Note. Average scores of participants in each slip for 10 weeks. The number of participants each week varies slightly due to the absence of some students or their submission failure (The average participation: 21.6/38 students). A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree).

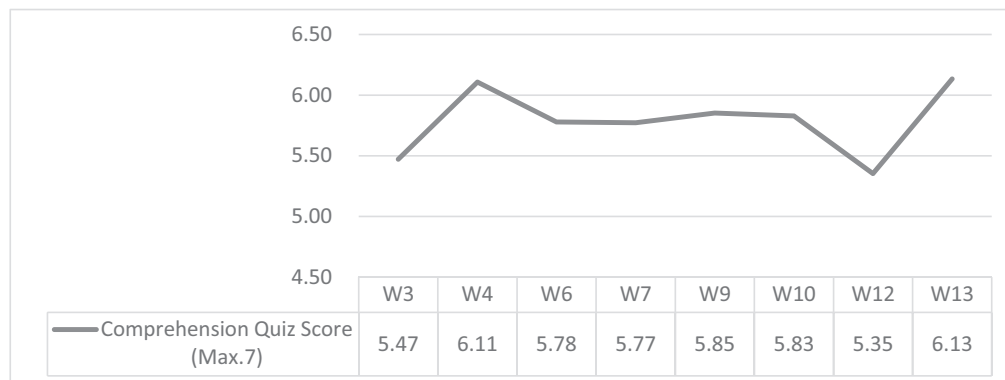
Overall, the participants enjoyed working with their classmates, especially during the group-work days (Weeks 5, 8, 11, and 15). Because the students mostly worked in pairs randomly

for a short while with many different classmates, they did not feel that they had enough time to get to know each other with a specific individual in the regular reading weeks. In fact, learning about their classmates was not the primary purpose of the random pair work; the instructions were more focused on exchanging opinions and using certain phrases for a smooth conversation, while students spent a fair amount of time on team-making on the group-work days. Although cohesion scores were quite positive on those regular reading weeks, this considerable difference shows that the length of time spent together is a crucial element of group building and improving cohesion, which supports previous studies (e.g. Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Kagan, 2013).

Another interesting factor is that the students' perceptions of group work and their classmates' participation shifted weekly throughout the semester, although gradual growth was expected. The best score was on the final week after they worked together in the same groups for two weeks for the final project. This result is fairly similar to the research of Yoshimura et al. (2021), which examined dynamic changes in English learners' attitudes toward cooperative learning. They also indicated that learners' perceptions changed depending on the timing and different processes of the group projects. At the beginning of the project, learners needed more social skills to build a relationship, but gradually other factors became important to accomplish the goal, such as positive interdependence and face-to-face interactions (Yoshimura et al., 2021). For the current research, getting to know each other was not a necessary element to complete a task in some weeks, besides they were becoming friends through the class, so there might not have been much new information about some individuals for certain students who were getting close to each other toward the end of the semester. This could explain why the scores of item C were quite low in the later weeks. Additionally, some unit passages could have been a little challenging or the topic was unfamiliar for the students to exchange opinions on during the pair talk, which made it harder to enjoy the discussions. The scores of the reading comprehension quiz displayed in Figure 6 were not always good either. This suggests that the students' interests or feelings of relatedness to the unit contents could also affect their level of contribution to group work, and this can create a negative impact on building cohesion in groups.

Figure 6

Scores on the Reading Comprehension Quiz in Reading (Non-Group Work) Weeks



Note. Average scores of participants in each quiz for 8 regular reading weeks. (Max 7 points)

Interviews

Three individuals from the target class voluntarily met the instructor and answered the interview questions approximately 10 days after the last class meeting. The details of the interviewees are provided in Table 3. The questions were divided into several categories: the students' English-learning background, their experiences and opinions of group work throughout the course, and their relationships with classmates and group cohesion. All interviews were conducted in Japanese. The interviewees' comments on their experiences and opinions toward cooperative learning are analyzed below.

Table 3

Details of the Interviewees

Student	Ave. comprehension score (Max.7)	Perceived English Skills		WTC	
		pre	post	pre	post
S1	6.75	2.0	3.7	2.83	3.50
S2	5.37	3.4	4.2	3.50	4.0
S3	6.62	2.9	4.4	3.0	3.33
Class Average	5.26	2.33	3.63	2.63	3.22

Note. The interviewees' names are displayed in numbers as pseudonyms. For Perceived English Skills and WTC, the average of the individual scores is displayed. (Max 5 points)

All the interviewees' comments toward cooperative activities were mostly positive, and the scores in perceived abilities and WTC for all three individuals showed a significant

improvement. Although these three volunteers could be considered as the ones who participated in class more actively than some others, their opinions were quite similar to the perspectives found in the analysis of the questionnaires and the Exit slip of the whole group. Commonly, the interviewees said that they had not expected to talk and communicate a lot with classmates in a reading-focused course, although they found the group work enjoyable in class. Also, they said that they became friends through the class activities in this course. However, the interviewees mentioned that they could not practice speaking or discussing in English during group work because they, and their classmates, often spoke Japanese. The balance of language practice and building rapport must be considered carefully for further development of the course; nevertheless, to grow group cohesion, the series of cooperative activities fairly played an important role in the class. The common feedback collected through the interviews is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4*Common Comments from the Interviews*

Comment categories	Comments
Class method/ Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaking or cooperative activities in a reading class were unexpected. • Learned how to read efficiently • Group-work days were the most interesting.
Pair/Group work	<p>[Positive]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Became able to keep the conversation going longer in English • It was good that each person played a specific role for the group work. • Be able to learn from each other • Liked that we could help each other and notice mistakes when in pairs <p>[Negative]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not able to practice speaking English during group work • Often switched to Japanese
Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Became familiar and comfortable with most classmates • Exchanged social media accounts and became close to some group members • Spending the entire 90 min together helped us become friends

Note. The comments from the students above were translated from Japanese by the author.

S1 usually scored very well on quizzes, but she was not very confident in her English ability. She had never learned English in communicative ways, but she went to a cram school and studied English more than other subjects there before entering this university. She stated that she was now very willing to learn English more and was thinking about joining a study abroad program. Her expectations for this reading course were to do some grammar work based on her experiences in high school. However, she explained that she

enjoyed group work because she generally liked meeting and talking with new people, and in fact, she made friends with several students through the group work in class. In contrast, she reported that some of her classmates complained that they were unhappy about being in pairs or groups with people they were not familiar with. As Thornton et al. (2020) indicated, a large class size affects students' low group cohesion. The number of students enrolled in this class was 38, which was relatively large for a language class, especially for communicative activities, and, inevitably, some students did not feel comfortable interacting with many unfamiliar classmates more than others, and for certain activities, they needed longer time to feel relaxed enough to talk about themselves. Especially at the time when this research was taking place, many other classes were still offered online, and for some of them, this course was the only time they physically needed to come to school. They did not have enough opportunities to become acquainted with several others outside this course. For S1, the group work was enjoyable, but it should be noted that a considerable number of individuals, although not a lot, still felt uncomfortable working with other classmates or were not yet able to find it effective. This fact should be considered for the further development of this course with a large number of students.

Another interesting opinion from S1 was that during the group work, she was unable to practice speaking English, although working in groups was very fun. Some expressions were introduced and practiced during the class, but when working on a relatively complicated task, the students were not capable of carrying on a conversation using English. The biggest reason for this was that Japanese use in group work was allowed, and students were more encouraged to work together than to speak English since the focus of the lesson was cooperative learning and building rapport.

S2 was a student who was generally confident and had studied English hard as well as other subjects. He also had experience learning English in a cram school for entrance exams, and he said that he had met good teachers of English throughout his school life, so he liked English. He was willing to learn English more to be able to respond well when he was asked questions in English. He expressed that he enjoyed group work, and he could talk with most of the students in the class during the semester. He said that he was not a fan of working in groups before, but he was able to have a good time in groups because the roles were clear, and everyone was usually responsible. He especially liked the group-work days because he could become more familiar with his teammates. In fact, he became acquainted with many students, so he said he could now have a conversation with them when they met in other situations.

As well as S1, S2 also mentioned that he could not speak much English when he was working on some tasks during group work on group-work days. In pair work, he felt he could handle some conversations in English for a few minutes, but group work was not the case. As mentioned above, cooperation was the main focus of the class, but it is necessary to find a fair balance between language practice and promoting group cooperation.

S3 was also a hard-working student. He had already passed the EIKEN Pre-2 level in high school, and in the comprehension quizzes, he scored almost perfect every time. He said that he was aware of the importance of improving his English skills, but he was not confident in going abroad or speaking much yet. His expectation of this course was to learn about grammar and to read English passages together, so he said that he was surprised and felt a little uncomfortable doing various talking and cooperative activities at the beginning of the semester. This idea was similar to that of other informants, and it is assumingly an important perspective many students might hold during the pre-term. Because of the traditional teaching system of junior high and high schools, which prepares learners for entrance exams, many students seemed to spend the previous year cramming a lot. This could influence the students' preconception that they would learn grammar forms or do some translations mostly in "reading" classes. However, he explained that after he became used to the class method of the current course, he started to see the advantages of the new experience. He especially liked the group-work days because he felt that the members were helping each other and that he could learn from other classmates. He said he did not have friends on the first day, but he became close friends with several classmates, and they often talked together.

On the other hand, S3 indicated several disadvantages he felt through the group work. He was sometimes worried about the score of the group work when he was with certain less cooperative or lower-level students. Group reward is an essential element in cooperative learning (Slavin, 1996), and it was applied to activities to maximize students' individual accountability. However, because of the diversity in their English abilities, certain students might have needed more help from others, and this could create a burden for a few advanced, and serious students. In terms of cooperation, this type of interaction in a heterogeneous group is necessary, but for some students, it could appear to be a disadvantage to their grades. It is necessary to provide students with clear explanations for the group goals in the class so that the group work can be fair and beneficial to every student. This opinion provides great insight into the further development of certain cooperative activities.

Discussion

This action research has shed light on implementing cooperative activities in a required reading course and suggested possible ways to improve class cohesion and learners' confidence in speaking English. Moreover, it revealed some challenges, such as balancing between cooperative learning and language practice.

The results of the questionnaires show that the students' perceived English-speaking skills have improved significantly throughout the semester. As the interview comments indicated, a certain number of students did not expect that they needed to speak a lot in the course which was said to be reading-focused; however, the series of pair talk to express ideas frequently had become a good habit, and it looked like they came to feel comfortable with saying greetings and starting a conversation every time they were in pairs or groups. In addition, grammar corrections were rarely provided for the students' talk in those pair and group activities, but the participants felt they could do more in English, especially on the elements such as *answer questions* and *ask for others' opinions*. Jacobs and Kimura (2013) stated that students were less worried about accuracy when they talked with their peers, and this might affect their motivation to talk more. Similarly, Yashima et al.'s (2016) research implied that through a series of opportunities in peer discussions, students found strategies to initiate turns by asking questions and listening carefully to respond well. Under the circumstance of no teacher's control, they tried harder to contribute to the task. By looking at the growth in their perceived speaking abilities, it can be said that cooperative activities were effective in enhancing the students' confidence in their English conversations. In addition to speaking skills, the students' perceived reading skills improved as well. Although minimal explanations of the forms and sentence structures were provided in class, the participants expressed that they could understand the reading passages better than before. The interviewees said that they could get help from their partners or group members for some exercises including some reading components, and considering these facts, the cooperative activities were successful in boosting the students' confidence in their overall English skills.

Although students responded positively about their cooperative learning experience, it is not noticeably clear whether some activities were a major help in building group cohesion. The scores of the items in the Exit slip were generally high but did not show constant growth or stability. These changes in perceptions of the participants' group cohesion support

the previous study of Yoshimura et al. (2021) explained above, but they also provide an interesting insight; one finding is that the students felt more positively toward their group cohesion on the group-work days. One interviewee expressed that working in the same team for 90 minutes pushed him to build connections with his teammates, and this implies that the length of time spent together is an essential element of group building as previous research implied (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 2013). For establishing cohesion in class, group-project-style activities could work better than random pair talk or information exchanges for a few minutes with many students.

In addition, the themes of the unit or the contents of the lesson can be a significant factor influencing the students' participation. Weeks 6 and 9 were the first day of a new unit, and students might have been a little less confident in giving ideas yet; besides some of the new strategies were often introduced on the same day. This could affect the students' small contributions, which lowered their cohesion scores. Nevertheless, in the post-term questionnaire, students showed the highest cohesion scores for the final group project. Even though there were some weeks when students felt a little less cohesive with others, the final scores could explain that they had a positive impression of the overall group interactions throughout the semester with regularly offered group work.

Generally, few students know each other in a first-year class at a Japanese university, and this can result in their hesitations to perform at their best in class. As research indicated, building good relationships with others is a principal factor for students' well-being and good academic performance throughout their college lives (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 2013). If the students are given enough time and opportunities to interact with each other productively, language classes can potentially provide strong support for them to create a safe community. Johnson and Johnson (1999) explained that meaningful cooperation can bring greater psychological health and higher self-esteem in students, and Johnson et al. (2013) stated that cooperative learning promotes positive attitudes toward the university experience itself. During the pandemic, many college classes were offered online, giving students extra challenges, including technological difficulties and the absence of communication for building a network. Some students expressed their desire to have face-to-face classes during this transitional period in 2022, which suggests that they were aware of the necessity of decent opportunities to have in-person, social exchanges in the school environment. Now that we can meet the demand for students to build communities, universities should take advantage of what was learned in the online era.

As for WTC, the students' answers in the questionnaire showed that they were much

more willing to use English at post-term, especially under classroom-related situations, such as *talk to a teacher for questions* and *speak in front of a class*. The interviewees' answers revealed that some students expected to be doing more passive tasks in a reading class, and this could have affected students' lower WTC at the beginning of the semester. However, the cooperative activities might have pushed the students' active participation because the tasks required them to move activities forward to reach the goal. They needed careful listening and skills to get enough information or ideas from their peers without much teacher control. In addition, according to Yashima (2002), if a learner is motivated, he or she tends to feel more confident in their competence, and this confidence affects his or her WTC. The participants' scores for their perceived skills also grew significantly in a similar way as WTC improved; thus, it can be said that these two elements are interrelated. In fact, the three interviewees' growth of perceived skills was correlated with the improvement of their WTC by 0.21 points. Although this is not significant and needs more investigation, this result can support Yashima's (2002) study above, and the cooperative activities have a great potential to increase learners' WTC, as well as their confidence in speaking English.

For this action research, WTC items were developed for the target class, including situations unrelated to the classroom environment based on the ideas of previous research (e.g. Hashimoto, 2002; Watanabe, 2017). As expected, the scores of these items increased less than those of classroom-specific situations. However, the slight growth in these unfamiliar situations implies that, even in the classroom, there is a great possibility to motivate students to use English outside school, as one of the interviewees expressed that she wanted to go abroad now.

Overall, the participants' WTC made a vast improvement, but its relationship with cooperative learning should be explored in more quantitative and qualitative ways. In addition, further research with more proper observations of the students' interactions in groups is necessary to examine how they interact and initiate conversations in groups.

Conclusion

After the two-year break from face-to-face class management, this semester was a great challenge with new adjustments, and many elements for cooperative activities were still a work in progress. However, the results indicated the possible benefits of cooperative group work, including increased confidence and higher WTC towards in-class activities, as well as building the students' group cohesion. To expand these possibilities, some tasks and

materials for the class need to be improved for future study. First, the activities should be planned and developed more carefully to maximize effective peer interactions. This includes more familiar topics and constant team-building activities with a longer amount of time to help them build group cohesion. Second, although the results of this action research showed some positive changes in students' perceived skills, it would be richer with different qualitative features that look more deeply into their experiences of group work and group dynamics, such as recording of the exchanges and detailed observations of particular groups. Third, to develop this study more, WTC should focus more on diverse types of situations and be investigated further through both qualitative and quantitative ways.

All these discussions considered, the results of this research suggest that by frequently experiencing a series of cooperative activities, students learned more about their classmates and became comfortable working together in class, which led to their perceived speaking skills and motivation to speak English to improve significantly even though the students were allowed to communicate in their shared L1 in the group work. Although there are still many challenges to implementing cooperative learning more effectively in class, this action research provides great insight into the positive effects of cooperation in a reading-focused English class.

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Appendix

Questionnaire items

Note. The questionnaires were conducted online on Google Form. The unrelated items are omitted from the original questionnaire.

English Speaking Abilities

How well can you perform in each exercise of speaking English?

***5-point Likert Scale (1: I can't do it at all - 5: I can do it well.)**

1. Exchange greetings with others
2. Introduce myself to others
3. Start a conversation
4. Maintain a conversation
5. Express my opinions
6. Ask for others' opinions
7. Answer questions
8. Make comments on others' opinions
9. Introduce someone to others
10. Summarize a discussion

Willingness to Communicate

How willing are you to communicate in English under the situations below?

***5-point Likert Scale (1: Never do/I don't want to do that. to 5: Always do/I want to do that.)**

If there is a chance to...

1. Talk to a stranger who is in trouble or needs help in a town or at a station
 2. Talk to a teacher for questions
 3. Talk with a group of foreigners to guide them to an area or school
 4. Speak in front of a class
 5. Talk with an acquaintance by chance
 6. Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class
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