Enhancing Group Cohesion and Willingness to Communicate in Class: Cooperative Learning in College-Level English Education

三　島　恵理子

MISHIMA Eriko

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

Introduction

University life marks a significant transition for students, often filled with excitement and positive expectations. However, the independence and self-regulation required at the tertiary level can be bewildering for many, contrasting sharply with the structured environment of high school, where fixed classrooms, assigned desks, and daily homeroom meetings provided a sense of stability and familiarity, alongside important announcements and information. In addition to this, students' busy lifestyles with long commutes and multiple part-time jobs limit the time available for meaningful interactions with college peers. Despite the myriad opportunities for social interaction and community-building offered by universities, these opportunities are primarily leveraged by a few proactive students. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1993) stated that the quality of interpersonal relationships among students significantly influences the quality of their college experience. The absence of familiar peers can exacerbate feelings of isolation; indeed, social isolation and a lack of peer bonding have been cited as prevalent reasons for leaving college (Clifton, 2021; Johnson et al., 1993).

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated this dynamic by necessitating a shift to online learning, thereby hindering face-to-face interactions. Although online learning offers flexibility regarding time and location, it has not adequately facilitated collaborative opportunities, negatively impacting students' community-building and increasing their sense of isolation (Alodwan, 2021). Even now after the pandemic, the reliance on online learning systems continues to reduce direct, real-life communication, as crucial information is readily

available online, diminishing the desire for in-person contact. Consequently, students often find themselves spending recess alone, engrossed in their smartphones, although their classmates are around and available. This underscores the need to balance the essential nature of online learning with the imperative to cultivate student connections and community because having good relationships are critical to students' overall well-being.

In the context of English language courses, additional factors may impede students' ability to form connections with their classmates. Unlike high school, where a common goal of preparing for entrance exams unified students, university students often pursue different goals and expectations regarding their English studies. This divergence can lead to a diminished sense of familiarity and connection among peers. Also, in many Japanese universities, students are required to take a few basic language courses, usually 90 minutes a week, with large, diverse cohorts of students from different departments. These conditions may allow students to remain passive and disengaged from their peers. Given the nature of language courses, where instructors have the platform to facilitate communication tasks, it is crucial to create a safe and inclusive environment that fosters positive rapport among students. Therefore, providing ample opportunities for students to build connections is essential, if not necessary.

This report presents the findings from the auther's action research conducted in two English reading courses at a private university during the spring semester of 2024. The study aimed to investigate the effects of cooperative activities on group cohesion and classroom performances. The target courses, which were semi-mandatory for non-English majors, comprised students who were not well-acquainted with one another. The ultimate objective was to identify optimal strategies for implementing cooperative learning methods in college English education, thereby enhancing students' well-being and academic success.

Literature Review
Group Cohesion

In a language classroom, it is necessary to incorporate a variety of exercises, given that language learning encompasses four fundamental skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the framework, interactions using the target language among learners are a common and vital component of a lesson. However, the efficacy of communicative practices can be significantly influenced by the learners' group dynamics. Group dynamics, defined as "the actions, processes, and changes that occur within groups and between groups" (Forsyth, 2014, p.2), is a critical notion when engaging learners in communicative activities. Dörnyei

and Murphy (2003) emphasized the necessity of fostering positive group dynamics in language education, as communicative tasks become challenging to execute if learners do not have favorable interpersonal relations. Within the realm of group dynamics, *group cohesion* emerges as a particularly essential variable in educational settings. Group cohesion, often referred to as group cohesiveness, is defined as the feeling of camaraderie (Carter & Patton, 2021) and is associated with a sense of closeness and belonging within a group (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003). According to Dörnyei and Murphy (2003), members of cohesive groups "participate in group activities willingly and are happy to cooperate with each other" (p.63), which is a positive trait of such groups.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of group cohesion in language learning environments. Group cohesion can positively influence learners' perceptions of their learning environment (Clement et al., 1994), enhance group productivity (Evans & Dion, 2012), and improve learners' willingness to communicate with each other (Cao & Philp, 2006). Thornton et al.'s (2020) research also highlighted the correlation between group cohesion and student attendance in college. The presence of good relationships with classmates can motivate students to participate more actively in class, which is crucial for preventing social isolation. Based on these research findings, it is evident that group cohesion plays a significant role in both students' well-being and their academic success. In the context of higher education, where opportunities for student interaction may be limited, facilitating the development of connections within each class should be a top priority. However, as noted, the hours allocated for each language class in most college courses are limited, making it challenging to dedicate sufficient time for interaction, while Dörnyei and Murphy (2003) pointed out that "the amount of time the parties have known each other is a powerful factor to solidify and stabilize the relations" (p.67). Therefore, instructors must design well-organized and productive plans to provide students with adequate opportunities to build positive relationships within the constrained time available in each lesson.

Researchers have proposed various strategies to enhance group cohesion, many of which emphasize the importance of students getting to know each other, including learning names and sharing personal experiences (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Helgesen, 2019). To achieve this goal, implementing cooperative learning principles could be highly beneficial. According to cooperative learning theories, group tasks should be meticulously planned and prepared to necessitate cooperation, which is crucial for creating a cohesive classroom environment. In the later section, the concepts and ideas of cooperative learning will be delved in greater detail.

Willingness to Communicate in L2

The notion of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) 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). Fairly recently, this concept has been extended to the domain of second language (L2) acquisition. In their study, MacIntyre et al. (1998) described their experiences with some L2 learners who, despite possessing high grammatical competence, were reticent to use their L2, while others eagerly engaged in communication with only minimal linguistic proficiency. This led to their introduction of WTC in the L2 context as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). Several studies have demonstrated that WTC can predict the frequency of communication in an L2 (Hashimoto, 2002; MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In their research, MacIntyre et al. (1998) illustrated the complex interrelations of potential influences on L2 use and positioned WTC just below L2 use in their pyramid model, indicating that WTC serves as the final step to actual utterance.

In Japan, students are accustomed to being passive and silent in traditional teacher-centered classrooms. This behavior could be misinterpreted as indicative of disinterest, laziness, or even refusal to participate in some Western cultures (Harumi, 2011), in addition to the fact that this unassertive attitude can impede their L2 development. Yashima's (1995) report highlighted that Japanese high school students studying abroad faced difficulties in forming interpersonal relationships with local peers due to a lack of skills and confidence in initiating interactions or contributing to conversations, which are essential for effective communication in English. Because of prolonged passive engagement in traditional school settings, initiating a conversation presents a significant challenge for Japanese learners. Consequently, fostering learners' WTC is crucial in the current context of English language education in Japan.

Several studies have explored methods to enhance Japanese students' WTC. The student-centered approach shows significant potential (Matsubara, 2007), and emphasizing opinion exchanges in English with classmates without focusing on speech accuracy could have a strong possibility to improve learners' WTC (Watanabe, 2017). Yashima et al. (2016) found that university students in their study developed strategies to initiate turns by asking questions and listening attentively through repeated small group discussions each week over a semester, resulting in a significant increase in their participation. Therefore, to promote learners' active engagement in English conversations, teachers must provide ample opportunities for students to communicate with each other using English, which can be

facilitated through the cooperative learning approach, which is explained in the following section.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning (CL) is defined as "the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (Johnson et al., 2013, p.3). When learners work cooperatively, they have significantly more opportunities to practice the language in communication than in a traditional, teacher-centered classroom (Kagan, 1995). This approach could help not only to promote students' language interactions but also to develop their positive relationships. CL can offer a supportive atmosphere that reduces the fear of making mistakes (High, 1993), which is one of the common Japanese traits that can create an obstacle when speaking L2 (Harumi, 2011). Kagan (1995) also explains that in a cooperative, peer-oriented group, learners can feel more comfortable and comparable to their team. Therefore, working cooperatively with peers can result in greater psychological well-being (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

While CL can be a powerful approach with plentiful benefits for language learning and group building, cooperative tasks cannot be achieved effectively if they are not structured and designed carefully (Kagan, 2013). In his work, Kagan introduced the four basic principles of CL: *Positive interdependence, Individual accountability, Equal participation,* and *Simultaneous interaction.* These principles are the heart of cooperation and what distinguishes CL from "group work." According to Kagan (2013), positive interdependence includes the idea that no one can complete a task without the help of others. Several other researchers presented similar sets of components as CL principles, and Johnson and Johnson (1999) put the same emphasis on positive interdependence, saying it is "the perception that we are linked with others in a way so that we cannot succeed unless they do" (pp.70-71). Thus, having a discussion over one topic in pairs is not necessarily considered CL unless the task involves the elements of positive interdependence. The second component is individual accountability, which is explained as "group success depends on contributions from all group members" (Anderson, 2019, p.9). Each student holds a responsibility for their role, while they encourage each other to participate and share their ideas and skills for contributing to the group (Anderson, 2019; Jacobs & Kimura, 2013; Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Anderson (2019) described that if these first two principles are required in a task, some common issues of group work, such as that only a few students do all the work, could be avoided. The other two principles: equal participation and simultaneous interaction, are also as important as they provide learners with plentiful opportunities to interact, which is opposed to the

structure of a teacher-centered classroom environment where only active volunteers get a chance, a few times an hour.

Cooperative group work, when guided by these principles, can foster a sense of security and enhance both motivation and efforts to learn (Kagan, 2013), and it is intrinsically linked to building group cohesion among learners and improving their WTC. Implementing CL within a classroom setting proves advantageous not only for content acquisition but also for reinforcing interpersonal relationships. However, this approach remains underutilized in higher education, as many students and educators lack an understanding of how to effectively engage in CL (Johnson et al., 1998). In fact, in the context of college education in Japan, students may experience discomfort transitioning from traditional lecture-styled classes to dynamic, cooperative learning environments. Considering this situation, one of the objectives of this action research is to explore the potential strategies and approaches to advocate for CL in college language education. By introducing practical and effective methods, this research also seeks to enhance students' motivation to learn and improve their language competencies.

Action Research Method

The present study examined aspects of group cohesion and WTC among Japanese university students and analyzed the interconnections between CL and these two constructs. Participants were the students enrolled in an English reading course, one of the compulsory elective classes for non-English majors, in the spring semester of 2024. Two classes were targeted for this investigation, wherein the author implemented the CL approaches and administered surveys, identically. The students in both groups consisted of 32 students each, were all second-year students who had previously completed two required English courses in their first year. Although the class was labeled as "intermediate," the students' English proficiency levels varied widely, ranging from EIKEN Grade 2 to Grade 3 (CEFR B-1 to A-2) or even below. Additionally, students from several different departments were designated to the same groups. The first group comprised students from three distinct faculties, while the second group included students from two different ones. The assigned textbook focused on "reading" skills, with the common syllabus stating the goal of improving English reading abilities. Aside from this goal, the instructor implemented numerous CL activities, allocating 60% of class time to cooperative work, as one of the objectives for the class. Questionnaires were administered twice: pre-term and post-term to explore the changes in their group cohesion and WTC. Additionally, perceived English-speaking abilities were included in the

questionnaires to further investigate students' confidence in speaking, which is likely to be associated with their WTC. Responses to the questionnaires were collected through online forms, completed voluntarily by the participants within an assigned period. The questionnaires were developed as part of this action research concerning the previous studies related to this field. Detailed information on the questionnaires is provided in the subsequent sections.

Cooperative Activities

As previously mentioned, to investigate the effects of CL in the classroom, 60% of class time was allocated to cooperative activities. Aiming the primary objective of the course within the school curriculum, the lessons focused on introducing English reading strategies and having students apply these skills to academic texts. CL tasks were predominantly employed as pre-reading and post-reading activities; however, students were also required to assist each other during reading sessions through cooperative structures introduced by Kagan (1993) and several related research. Students were paired with different classmates for each activity, resulting in interactions with at least 4 to 5 peers individually in every class. During the initial weeks, students were instructed and trained to greet each other and initiate conversations with a simple "hi" and "how are you?" as an opener. Consequently, they became habituated to this practice, initiating new tasks with greetings without further prompting. A few specific activities were incorporated into most lessons, which are elaborated upon in detail below.

1. Pair Talk

Each lesson commenced with a conversation task known as Pair Talk, wherein students practiced English conversations with their classmates. They were introduced to specific English phrases as conversation strategies to sustain a dialogue and facilitate more natural and engaging interactions. The strategies, which included phrases for "Opener/Closer", "Commenting", and "Follow-up Questions", to name a few, were adapted from previous research, particularly drawing on Kenny and Woo (2012). These were presented with examples and short dialogues for practice, then students engaged in multiple rounds of rehearsals using these phrases with different partners, completing with a more extended conversation with a new partner. As previously mentioned, students were required to meet and greet each time they were paired with a new classmate and were encouraged to incorporate their true feelings and personal ideas into the conversations, as Dörnyei (1997) stated that sharing genuine personal information about each other could help learners foster

cohesiveness. This exercise constituted the initial 20 to 30 minutes of class time and was consistently aligned with the content of the reading passages learned that week.

2. RallyRobin

When the students were asked to answer questions about the reading passages or share their opinions, they utilized the basic structure called *RallyRobin* (Kagan, 2013). This structure involves students simply taking turns generating oral responses in pairs. According to Kagan (2013), this CL structure allows all participants to respond and listen to each other, and all pairs work simultaneously, which is unlikely to happen in teacher-centered settings. In addition to the exchange of opinions, students in the target classes were required to attentively listen to their partners and demonstrate agreement or appreciation with positive comments, such as saying "Thank you for sharing your ideas" or "I think so, too" before switching roles. As Kagan (1989) suggested 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), this practice potentially connects to students' positive perceptions of the learning environment. Moreover, an additional task was frequently incorporated into this main opinion exchange, requiring students to repeat or summarize the information shared by their partners. By integrating this structured approach consistently, students receive regular reinforcement during conversations. Thus, RallyRobin was employed frequently with the expectation of increasing students' motivation to speak up and actively engage in spoken interactions.

3. Group Work; Missionaries

Upon completing each unit, group work sessions were incorporated into the lesson plan, allowing students to engage in group activities fot an extended period of time with multiple classmates. Typically, these sessions lasted between 40 to 50 minutes and occurred once every four weeks. Groups of three or four students were randomly assigned and first tasked with deciding specific roles within the group, as well as creating a unique group name based on commonalities among group members. These activities were designed not only to foster familiarity with each other but also to promote the principles of CL, such as positive interdependence and individual accountability. Moreover, these group formation tasks were created for students to utilize their names or other simple personal facts, such as the alphabetical order of their given names or the distance between their homes and the school. As previously mentioned, learning each other's names is a crucial element in building good relationships (Helgesen, 2016), and familiarity among members can enhance learners' WTC in

group work (Cao & Philp, 2006). Therefore, employing these group-forming activities is essential to encourage students to pay attention to their teammates while working in groups.

The central feature of these group sessions was a cooperative activity called Missionaries, which was developed utilizing the concepts of Kagan Structures and modified by the ideas shared by Japan Association for Study of Cooperation in Education (JASCE). In this activity, students initially collaborated within their original groups (home groups) to compose paragraphs or undertake simple research on assigned topics. Following this, they were redistributed into different groups, where they individually presented their home group's work to the new group members. This approach ensured that everyone was responsible for their group work, fostering equal participation and contribution from each member. An additional component of this activity involved students individually reporting their group work on the class's online chat system. Each student was required to write a short paragraph about their group, including details about their team members and a summary of the group's activities. This practice provided opportunities for redundant output and an extra layer of responsibility, as students had to remember and accurately convey the information shared by their group members.

Results

Group Cohesion

Group cohesion was assessed and analyzed through two elements: perceptions of group work and the extent to which students knew their classmates. The detailed scores are presented below in Table 1. The changes in the scores for the first five items indicated that they grew positive perspectives toward cooperative work throughout the semester. Notably, item 1, *I enjoy working on assignments with two or more classmates* displayed the most significant growth among the five items, with an increase of +0.62. While some students still preferred studying alone in the post-term (13% of the participants chose 2: Disagree), their understanding of the benefits of cooperation has considerably developed.

Table 1

Group Work Perceptions and Cohesion

Items	Pre-term (N=51)	Post-term (N=52)
1. I enjoy working on assignments with two or more classmates.	3.71	4.33
2. I prefer studying with others to studying alone.	3.76	3.96
3. I get more work done when I study with an assigned group.	3.98	4.33
4. I think working in a pair/group can help my English skills improve.	4.22	4.37
5. I perform better when I can work with familiar members of the class than with people I don't know very well.	3.73	3.92
Total (Average of Items 1-5)	**3.88**	**4.18**
6. I am familiar with my classmates in this class.	2.84	3.63
7. I know the names of my classmates in this class.	2.69	3.46
Total (Average of Items 6-7)	**2.76**	**3.55**

Note. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree).

One of the primary objectives of the study, through the incorporation of cooperative activities, was to facilitate students getting to know each other and ultimately enhance group cohesion. The items assessing familiarity with each other and knowledge of classmates' names showed notable improvement. Although the pre-term scores indicated that a considerable number of students were not well-acquainted with their classmates, by the post-term, over 90% of the participants scored above 3.0, reflecting significant progress in familiarity and cohesion. The distributions of the participants' answers for these two items are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Group Cohesion (Familiarity and Name Recognition)

6.　I am familiar with my classmates in this class	5	4	3	2	1
Pre-tern (N=51)	1 (2%)	8 (16%)	28 (55%)	10 (19%)	4 (8%)
Post-term (N=52)	11 (21%)	14 (27%)	25 (48%)	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
7.　I know the names of my classmates in this class.	5	4	3	2	1
Pre-tern (N=51)	1 (2%)	7 (14%)	26 (51%)	9 (17%)	8 (16%)
Post-term (N=52)	4 (8%)	21 (40%)	23 (44%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)

Note. The number of participants who chose each score. A 5-point scale was used for the answer choices (1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree).

Perceived English-speaking Abilities

In the questionnaires, participants were asked to assess how well they could perform each exercise of speaking English, such as *Exchange greetings* and *Start a conversation*. The average scores of the participants are presented in Figure 1.
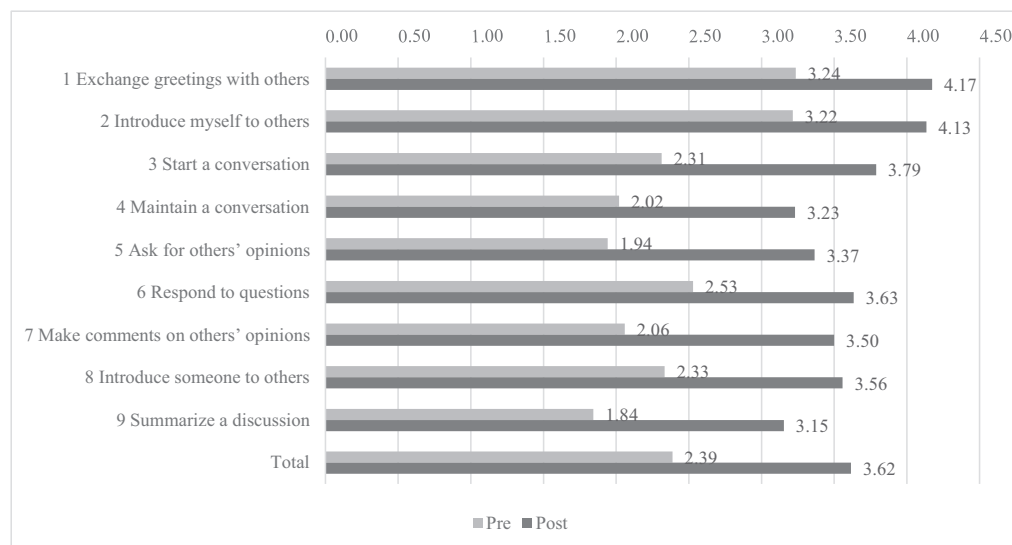
The average scores of all nine items improved significantly, increasing by 1.23 points. It can be inferred that the participants had some prior experience in exchanging greetings and introducing themselves during their English studies, as their pre-term scores for these activities were already relatively high compared to other items. This pre-existing confidence was further reinforced, resulting in participants rating their skills considerably higher, with scores exceeding 4.10. Throughout the semester, students were given numerous opportunities to converse with at least 3 or 4 peers in each session, making greeting one another a habitual practice. This habit became so ingrained that the instructor no longer needed to remind students to do so by the end.

The types of activities that showed the most significant improvement were items 3, 5, and 7, each with an increase of over 1.4 points. Specifically, for item 3, *Start a conversation*, one contributing factor is that students learned certain phrases to initiate a conversation at the beginning of the course and continued using these whenever they were paired with a partner for a discussion task, as mentioned above. Furthermore, students were regularly tasked with completing assignments within a specific timeframe, which helped them gradually become accustomed to managing their time efficiently and starting to work in

English without hesitation. To meet the required goals of the tasks within the allocated time, students learned how to advance the procedure using English. This is also linked to the increases observed in items 5, *Ask for others' opinions*, and 7, *Make comments on others' opinions*. CL requires positive interdependence and individual accountability, whereby students need each other's knowledge and ideas to complete the tasks. Throughout the process, they naturally learned and practiced soliciting opinions and encouraged one another by providing feedback, thereby facilitating task completion. Overall, the items that exhibited improvement are those that require initiation and motivation to engage in conversations; this suggests that participants have become more confident and willing to actively participate in English oral interactions.

Figure 1

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.).

Willingness to Communicate

The questionnaire to investigate the participants' WTC was created for this specific research, which was adapted and modified from the L1 WTC questionnaire originally developed by McCroskey (1992) and the L2 WTC questionnaire designed for Japanese learners of English by Sick and Nagasaka (2000). This is to assess the extent to which participants are willing, confident, and nervous to engage in communication in certain situations using English. Each situational statement was evaluated across the three

dimensions: *willingness, confidence,* and *nervousness,* which are the elements used to measure the participants' WTC levels, based on the previous studies. In this research, the term "nervousness" was employed to replace "anxiety," which appeared in the existing literature mentioned above, in order to align with the current setting. The eleven items devised for this study were tailored specifically to the participants, corresponding to their classroom activities, with a few items relating to their possible encounters outside school. (See Appendix for the complete list of items.)

Table 3 presents the average scores of the participants' responses to pre- and post-term questionnaires on their WTC. Among the three dimensions, *confidence* showed the biggest growth while *willingness* displayed the highest scores in both times. Overall, the participants' total WTC made a modest improvement, accompanied by a slight decrease in nervousness scores.

Table 3

WTC Total

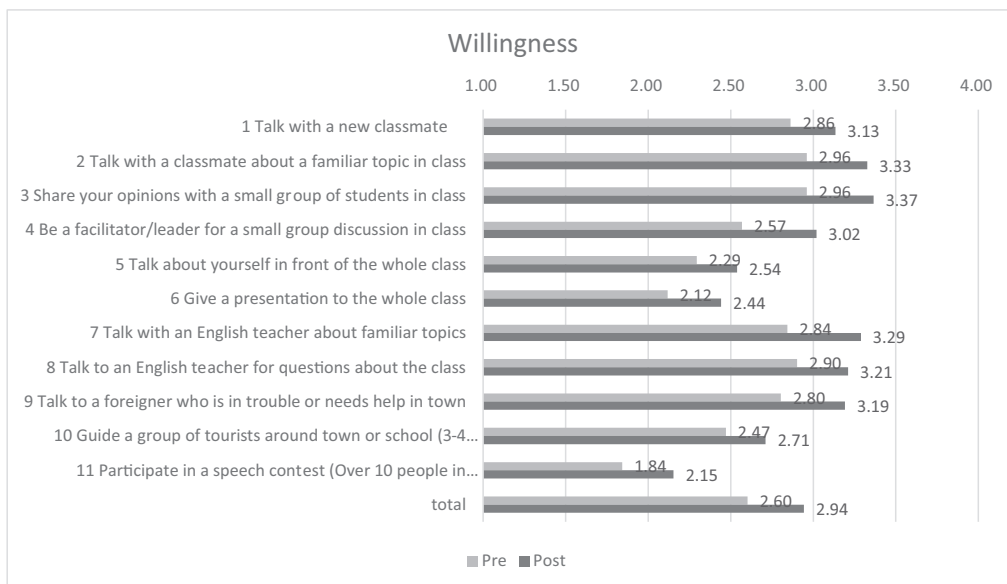|	Willingness	Confidence	Nervousness
Pre (N=51)	2.60	2.00	3.78
Post (N=52)	2.94	2.70	3.62

Note. Average scores of target students. A 5-point scale was used; 5 stands for the highest, and 1 represents the lowest. For the nervousness scale, the maximum value indicates the most negative outcome.

The changes observed in each dimension of WTC are illustrated in Figure 2, 3, and 4. (See Appendix for the details.) Figure 2 displayed the scores focusing on *willingness* dimension. Among the situation items, scenarios involving multiple recipients generally received lower scores. On the other hand, participants' willingness to speak English within small group settings showed a considerable increase with item 4: *Be a facilitator/leader for a small group discussion in class*, demonstrating a notable rise of 0.45 points. This finding aligns with the previous study by Yashima et al. (2016), which reported that learners are more inclined to contribute to discussions when teacher control is minimized. Additionally, the students were prone to exhibit reluctance to engage in activities that could entail evaluative components, such as item 11: *Participate in a speech contest* at first, however the scores for those items also displayed a fair growth. An intriguing observation is that the participants expressed a greater willingness to converse in English with an instructor. In teacher-centered environments, students often passively await their turn to speak; yet, in

lessons featuring cooperative activities, they tend to feel less hesitant to interact with teachers, who serve as valuable resources.
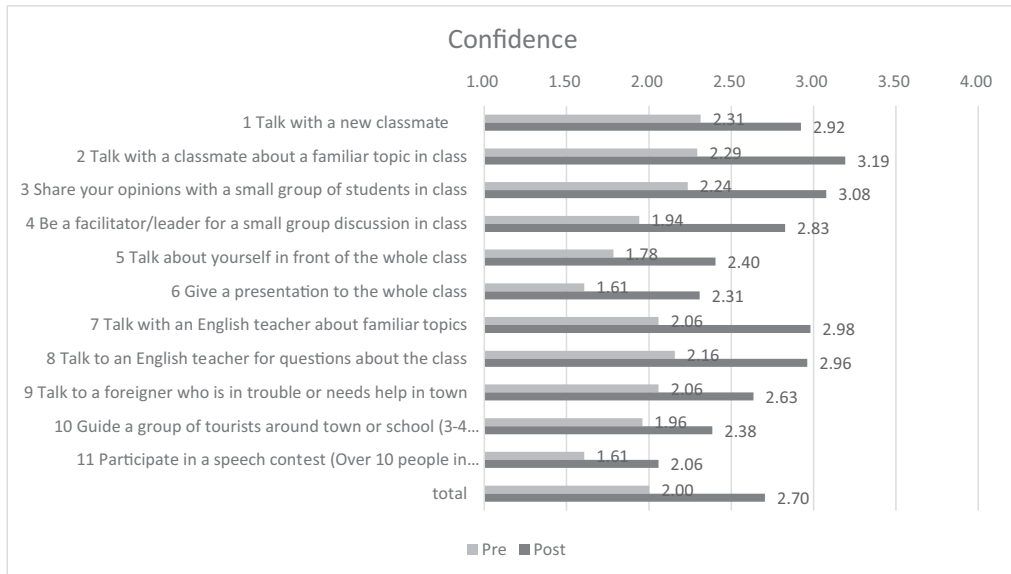
Figure 2

WTC (Willingness)

Willingness

Item	Pre	Post
1 Talk with a new classmate	2.86	3.13
2 Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class	2.96	3.33
3 Share your opinions with a small group of students in class	2.96	3.37
4 Be a facilitator/leader for a small group discussion in class	2.57	3.02
5 Talk about yourself in front of the whole class	2.29	2.54
6 Give a presentation to the whole class	2.12	2.44
7 Talk with an English teacher about familiar topics	2.84	3.29
8 Talk to an English teacher for questions about the class	2.90	3.21
9 Talk to a foreigner who is in trouble or needs help in town	2.80	3.19
10 Guide a group of tourists around town or school (3-4…	2.47	2.71
11 Participate in a speech contest (Over 10 people in…	1.84	2.15
total	2.60	2.94

■Pre ■Post

Confidence scores exhibited trends similar to those observed in the willingness dimension; however, the growth rates of the items were considerably greater in the confidence measures. (See Figure 3 for details.) Notably, item 2: *Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class,* showed a substantial improvement, with an increase of 0.90 points. This result is likely to be attributable to the Pair Talk activity conducted weekly, suggesting that the frequent practice positively influenced this outcome. Despite that participants initially expressed moderate willingness to engage in certain situations involving the whole class, such as for item 5: *Talk about yourself in front of the whole class*, and 6: *Give a presentation to the whole class*, by the end of the term, their confidence to perform these tasks had significantly increased.
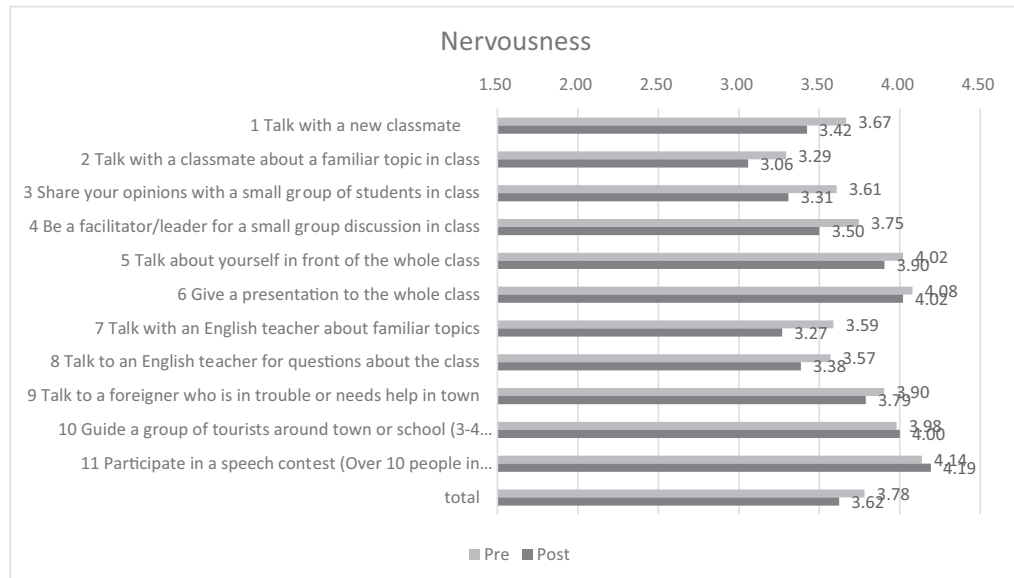
Figure 3

WTC (Confidence)

In Figure 4, the participants' *nervousness* scores are displayed in the same manner as the figures for the other two dimensions. As described, the scale for nervousness indicates that the maximum score represents the most negative outcome, with a score of 5 signifying a high level of nervousness when engaging in the activity. Compared to the other two elements, the results on this dimension did not indicate a remarkable improvement as a whole; the participants still felt somewhat nervous when they worked on speaking tasks until the end of the term. Meanwhile item 7: *Talk with an English teacher about familiar topics* demonstrated a notable change, with a -0.32-point difference between the pre-term and post-term assessments. Similar to the results of the other two dimentions displayed above, communicating with an instructor in English appeared to become less challenging for the participants. In lessons focused on CL, teachers act as facilitators rather than being the central figures or enforcers of classroom rules. This shift may positively influence their WTC with teachers, as participants perceived interactions with instructors as less anxiety-inducing.

According to Johnson et al. (1998), CL methods are often underutilized, particularly at the college level, due to a prevailing culture that emphasizes competition and individual achievement. Students may resist this new approach, as they often believe that their tuition is paid to learn from instructors rather than peers. The observed reduction in nervousness scores suggests that fostering positive relationships not only with classmates but also with

teachers could play an important role in enhancing learners' WTC.

Figure 4

WTC (Nervousness)

Nervousness

	Pre	Post
1 Talk with a new classmate	3.42	3.67
2 Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class	3.06	3.29
3 Share your opinions with a small group of students in class	3.31	3.61
4 Be a facilitator/leader for a small group discussion in class	3.50	3.75
5 Talk about yourself in front of the whole class	3.90	4.02
6 Give a presentation to the whole class	4.02	4.08
7 Talk with an English teacher about familiar topics	3.27	3.59
8 Talk to an English teacher for questions about the class	3.38	3.57
9 Talk to a foreigner who is in trouble or needs help in town	3.79	3.90
10 Guide a group of tourists around town or school (3-4...	3.98	4.00
11 Participate in a speech contest (Over 10 people in...	4.14	4.19
total	3.62	3.78

Comments from Students

In the post-term questionnaire, participants were given the option to provide comments about their classroom experiences. These comments were subsequently categorized and analyzed. The common comments are presented in Table 4.

Many students noted that they formed friendships with numerous classmates, a trend observed throughout the semester. The participants were all in their third semester of college and had encountered few opportunities to interact with students from other departments. They expressed that they did not usually engage with students outside their communities; however, they found the experience to be interesting. Also, they came to realize that having conversations with different peers during each activity was both fun and beneficial for enhancing their communication skills. A notable finding is that students were previously accustomed to lecture-based language courses and found the CL-focused lessons markedly different from their prior experiences in learning English. Although some participants initially felt nervous about adapting to the new style of language learning and interacting with numerous unfamiliar classmates, they gradually found these activities enjoyable and began to appreciate the opportunities more.

Table 4

Common Comments by Categories

Comment categories	Comments
Group Cohesion	・Made new friends through talking with many classmates every time. ・Enjoyed the communication with students from different departments. ・Became familiar with different students every time, so it became easy to talk to anyone. ・Fun to work together and got closer to the group members.
English Skills/ Performance	・Felt that I was genuinely learning the language through the series of English communication in class. ・Learned not only how to have English conversations but also to think about the topics and express my opinions. ・Became more motivated to participate actively in English. ・Realized that I could communicate in English better with the series of practices every time. ・Learned new ideas from group members and deepened my knowledge by working together with them.
Class Experience	・Enjoyed the course a lot as it was completely different from the English classes I had taken before, which were lectures. ・Fun to learn contents mostly through communication. ・Never had this type of lesson in college so I felt nervous at the beginning, but gradually found it very enjoyable.

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

Discussion

In college, students are expected to be independent; however, creating a safe community is equally essential for their overall well-being. This action research has shed light on implementing CL in a college English course, where the majority of students typically anticipate lecture-based instructions. The findings suggest that cooperative activities can significantly enhance group cohesion and learners' WTC in English by providing ample opportunities for interacting with each other within the classroom environment.

The results of the pre-term questionnaire for group cohesion revealed that participants were not familiar with many of their classmates at the beginning of the study, despite having spent the previous year at the same university. This is a common scenario in Japanese college settings, where many courses are lecture-based and do not require students to cooperate or interact with each other. High (1993) observed that learners typically experience anxiety when required to speak an L2 in class, and this anxiety is exacerbated

by uncertainty regarding their peers' reactions. Unlike their high school experiences, college students may lack close friends who can provide support when they struggle with answering questions or make mistakes in class. This fear and uncertainty can inhibit learners from participating in speaking activities. Due to this tendency, some students in this action research had expressed a preference for individual work over group work; however, by the end of the semester, the majority found cooperative activities both important and enjoyable. Indeed, the participants had recognized the benefits of peer cooperation even before the coursework started, and their experiences throughout the semester served to validate these benefits. Through the experience, students had not only become acquainted with each other but also regarded one another as friends. This suggests that regularly assigned cooperative activities contributed to fostering positive relationships among peers.

The development of group cohesion appears to have had some impact on the students' scores in the perceived English-speaking skills questionnaire; they rated their skills much higher at the post-term assessment. This was particularly evident in items related to habitual behaviors such as greetings and self-introductions, where students demonstrated increased confidence and comfort throughout the semester. One important finding is that participants felt more competent in initiating turns; they became more capable of starting conversations, asking for opinions, and making comments, all of which require a willingness to speak out in English. A possible reason for this shift is that students became less conscious about producing correct statements, as grammar corrections were rarely provided during cooperative tasks. Instead, they began focusing more on communication itself. This finding supports the previous studies by Jacobs and Kimura (2013), which indicated that students were less concerned about accuracy when conversing with their peers, and Yashima et al.'s (2016) research, which demonstrated that through a series of peer discussions, students developed strategies to initiate turns by asking questions and listening carefully to respond effectively. Observing the growth in their perceived speaking abilities, it could be concluded that cooperative activities were effective in enhancing students' confidence in conducting English conversations.

Regarding their WTC scores, participants exhibited considerable growth in the willingness and confidence dimensions, though there was no comparable improvement in nervousness. The growth was particularly notable in items directly related to the weekly activities, such as sharing opinions and playing leadership roles in small groups. Interestingly, items related to interactions with instructors also improved, despite the instructor's role as a facilitator and the limited time for individual interactions between students and the instructor. This improvement may be attributed to the shift from a teacher-centered

environment experienced previously by participants; the instructor's role transitioned from being the central figure to a supportive facilitator, which likely made participants feel more comfortable communicating with her. Although the results in the nervousness dimension did not parallel the other two, and this needs further investigation, they provided an interesting insight. This suggests that despite their nervousness, the participants became willing and confident enough to engage in certain activities in class, by the end of the semester. As explained above, WTC items were specifically designed for the target groups, with a few exceptions incorporating situations outside the classroom environment, based on the frameworks of previous studies (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; Watanabe, 2017). The scores for outside-class items exhibited lower compared to classroom-specific situations, as anticipated. However, the slight improvement in these unfamiliar contexts suggests that even through the classroom practices, there is substantial potential to encourage students to use English in environments outside school, which is an ultimate goal of their English learning. Overall, the participants' WTC demonstrated a fair improvement; however, the relationship between WTC and CL warrants deeper exploration through qualitative methods. Future investigations should include observations of student interactions in groups to examine how they communicate and initiate conversations during cooperative tasks.

Conclusion

Building positive relationships with others is a crucial factor for students' well-being and academic success throughout their college lives (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kagan, 2013). When students are provided with sufficient time and opportunities to interact productively, language classes can serve as an excellent platform to foster friendships and enhance communication skills. To fully utilize this potential, CL methods could be more extensively implemented in college classrooms. Transitioning to this approach can be challenging due to students' expectations shaped by traditional classroom experiences; however, the current study revealed that CL created a positive atmosphere where participants enjoyed learning, consistent with Johnson et al. (2013), who asserted that CL promotes students' positive attitudes toward their university experience.

Overall, the results of this research highlight the significance of cooperative activities in enhancing students' cohesion and confidence in classroom interactions in English. To expand upon these findings, it is essential to refine cooperative tasks and materials, as well as develop methods to observe student interactions in more detail. Despite the numerous challenges associated with effectively implementing CL and collecting data, this study

provides valuable insights into the positive effects of cooperation on students' well-being in a college English class.

References

Alodwan, T. (2021). Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of English as foreign language students. *Educational Research and Reviews, 16*(7), 279-288.

Anderson, J. (2019). *Activities for cooperative learning: Making groupwork and pairwork effective in the ELT classroom*. Delta Publishing.

Cao, Y., & Philp, J. (2006). Interactional context and willingness to communicate: A comparison of behavior in whole class, group and dyadic interaction. *System, 34*(4), 480-493.

Carter, B., & Patton, E. (2021). Creating and maintaining group cohesion in online university classes. In P. Clement, R. Derrah, & P. Ferguson (Eds.), *Communities of Teachers & Learners*. JALT. https://doi. org/10.37546/JALTPCP2020-46.

Clément, R., Dörnyei, Z., & Noels, K. A. (1994). Motivation, self-confidence, and group cohesion in the foreign language classroom. *Language Learning, 44*(3), 417-448.

Clifton, W. (2021). Where have all the students gone? Why college students drop out. *The Journal of Innovation, Teaching & Digital Learning Experience 1*, 2-6.

Dörnyei, Z. (1997). Psychological processes in cooperative language learning: Group dynamics and motivation. *The Modern Language Journal, 81*(4), 482-493.

Dörnyei, Z., & Murphey, T. (2003). *Group dynamics in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Evans, C. R., & Dion, K. L. (2012). Group cohesion and performance: A meta-analysis. *Small Group Research, 43*(6), 690-701.

Forsyth, D. R. (2014). *Group dynamics (6th ed.)*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Harumi, S. (2011). Classroom silence: Voices from Japanese EFL learners. *ELT Journal, 65*(3), 260-269.

Hashimoto, Y. (2002). Motivation and willingness to communicate as predictors of reported L2 use: The Japanese ESL context. *University of Hawai'i Second Language Studies Paper, 20*(2), 29-70.

Helgesen, M. (2016). Happiness in ESL/EFL: Bringing positive psychology to the classroom. In P.D. MacIntyre, T. Gregersen, & S. Mercer (Eds.), *Positive Psychology in SLA*, (pp. 305-323).

Helgesen, M. (2019). *English teaching and the science of happiness: Positive psychology communication activities for language learning.* ABAX ELT.

High, J. (1993). *Second language learning through cooperative learning.* Kagan Publishing.

Jacobs, G. M. & Kimura, H. (2013). *Cooperative learning and teaching.* TESOL International Association.

Japan Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education. (2019). *The study of cooperation in education in Japan.* Nakanishiya.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1999). Making cooperative learning work. *Theory into Practice, 38*(2), 67-73.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (1998). Cooperative learning returns to college: What evidence is there that it works?. *Change, 30*(4), 26-35.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2013). Cooperative learning: Improving university instruction by basing practice on validated theory. *Journal on Excellence in University Teaching*, 1-26.

Kagan, S. (1989). The structural approach to cooperative learning. *Educational Leadership, 47*(4), 12-15.

Kagan, S. (1995). We can talk: Cooperative learning in the elementary ESL classroom. *ERIC Digest.*

Kagan, S. (2013). *Kagan cooperative learning structures.* Kagan Publishing.

Kenny, T., & Woo, L. (2011). *Nice talking with you, Level 1 teacher's manual.* Cambridge University Press.

MacIntyre, P. D. & Charos, C. (1996). Personality, attitudes, and affect as predictors of second language communication. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 15*(1), 3-26.

MacIntyre, P. D., Clement, R., Dornyei, A., and Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal, 82*, 545-562.

Matsubara, K. (2007). Classroom group dynamics and motivation in the EFL context. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.). *JALT 2006 Conference Proceedings.* Tokyo: JALT.

McCroskey, J. C. (1992). Reliability and validity of the willingness to communicate scale. *Communication Quarterly, 40*, 16-25.

McCroskey, J, C. & Baer, J. E. (1985). Willingness to communicate: The construct and its measurement. [Conference presentation]. The Speech Communication Association 71st, Denver, CO.

Sick, JR, & Nagasaka, JP (2000). A test of your willingness to communicate in English (Japanese version): Unpublished questionnaire.

Thornton, C., Miller, P., & Perry, K. (2020). The impact of group cohesion on key success measures in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 44*(4), 542-553.

Watanabe, M. (2013). Willingness to communicate and Japanese high school English learners. *JALT Journal, 35*(2), 153-172.

Watanabe, M. (2017). Willingness to communicate by Japanese learners of English and what they communicate through speaking activities. *CELES Journal, 46*, 71-78.

Yashima, T. (1995). English proficiency, personality and intercultural adjustment of Japanese students studying in America. *Intercultural Communication Studies, 5*(1), 83-108.

Yashima, T. (2002). Willingness to communicate in a second language: the Japanese EFL context. *Modern Language Journal, 86*(1), 54-66.

Yashima, T., MacIntyre, P. D., & Ikeda, M. (2016). Situated willingness to communicate in an L2: Interplay of individual characteristics and context. *Language Teaching Research, 22*(1), 115-137.

Zakahi, W. R., & McCroskey, J. C. (1989). Willingness to communicate: A potential confounding variable in communication research. *Communication Reports, 2*(2), 96-104.

Appendix

Questionnaire Items

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

_____

Perceived English-speaking Abilities

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

*5-point 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 Ask for others' opinions

6 Respond to questions

7 Make comments on others' opinions

8 Introduce someone to others

9 Summarize a discussion

Willingness to Communicate

-Willingness

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

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

-Confidence

How confident are you to communicate in English in the situations below?

*5-point Scale (1: Not confident at all. to 5: Very confident.)

-Nervousness

How nervous do you feel communicating in English in the situations below?

*5-point Scale (1: Not feel nervous at all. to 5: Feel very nervous.)

If there is a chance to…

1 Talk with a new classmate

2 Talk with a classmate about a familiar topic in class

3 Share your opinions with a small group of students in class

4　Be a facilitator/leader for a small group discussion in class

5　Talk about yourself in front of the whole class

6　Give a presentation to the whole class

7　Talk with an English teacher about familiar topics

8　Talk to an English teacher for questions about the class

9　Talk to a foreigner who is in trouble or needs help in town

10　Guide a group of tourists around town or school (3-4 people)

11　Participate in a speech contest (Over 10 people in the audience)

_____