

# Pilot cooperative learning in Japanese secondary school EFL contexts: what are the students' perceptions?

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This dissertation investigates the effectiveness of cooperative learning in a Japanese secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context from the viewpoint of students.

According to survey results by Benesse (2009), approximately three-quarters of the junior high school students surveyed in Japan dislike learning English and approximately 10 per cent of them do not comprehend lesson contents at all, meaning that there is a huge learning gap between students. The reasons for this phenomenon may be the negative influence of entrance examinations and competition among class mates.

The literature have revealed that cooperative learning could work effectively on learners' affective domain and help to facilitate language learning, regardless of the learners' academic achievements. Thus, throughout this research, I have attempted to unveil the effects of cooperative learning, from Japanese junior high school students' perceptions towards it, and the possibility of cooperative learning as an alternative approach to learning that replaces the traditional model of learning.

To this end, cooperative learning lessons designed on the basis of cooperative learning principles, were employed with third-year Japanese junior high school students. Then, a quantitative questionnaire (including qualitative open-ended questions) was conducted among 133 third-year Japanese junior high school students. Small group interviews (11 students) were also conducted.

The findings revealed that students regarded that cooperative learning is an effective approach to learning English at school. This includes the positive effects of cooperative learning on their affective domain, such as more motivation, enjoyment in learning, a sense of achievement, a relaxed atmosphere, a sense of comfort and a sense of self-confidence. In relation to higher- and lower-achieving students' perceptions, the results revealed that both levels of students evaluated cooperative learning as an effective way of learning. In cooperative learning contexts, even low-achieving students can comprehend lesson contents and complete the tasks they are given by working with peers, due to scaffolding provided by high-level peers in the group. Lower levels of anxiety, and a greater sense of comfort and self-confidence,

help low achievers to comprehend the lesson contents. In addition, the pressure to pull one's weight to complete group's task facilitates them to overcome difficulties in learning.

### **Impact**

Cooperative learning might facilitate the shift from a teacher-fronted to a learner-centred learning tradition in Japanese secondary school contexts. For decades, in Japan, both teachers and students have presumed that teachers teach and students listen during lessons. However, this belief has accompanied passive learning among students and deprived them of a chance to take the initiative in learning. However, cooperative learning might reform this belief in both students' and teachers' minds and require learners to have more responsibility for their learning, which is significant in the improvement of language learning.

In order to enhance the overall academic achievements of secondary school students, cooperation should be focused on more than competition. For decades, competition has been the norm as a driving force in Japanese secondary school classrooms. However, competition has produced a large number of students who dislike learning English, who have antagonistic feelings towards English, and who are unable to understand lessons by themselves. The findings of this research reveal that cooperation has a potential to help develop all students' English abilities, regardless of their academic achievement. A paradigm shift from competition to cooperation would bring better learning processes in the Japanese secondary school contexts. Moreover, this shift might match the Japanese government's educational policy reform, which focuses on developing students' communicative skills. When developing students' communicative competence, cooperation is necessary in the classroom.

In conclusion, cooperative learning is one of the most effective approaches to learning English for all Japanese secondary school students, regardless of their academic achievement. Due to competition and individual leaning in preparation for entrance examinations, Japanese students have lost the meaning of learning English, and hence, the majority of them have avoided participating in English lessons at school.