

**The benefits of a reading circle activity within a class of  
exchange students and Japanese students**

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【実践報告】

The benefits of a reading circle activity within a class of exchange students and Japanese students

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**Key words:** active learning, cooperative activity, reading circle, diverse classroom

## Introduction

Active learning has been the center of topic in the Japanese education system recently. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2012)<sup>(1)</sup> claims that active learning is a type of effective learning approach that students are able to develop generic skills including critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and writing. Likewise, Mukogawa Women's University encourages instructors to practice active learning in the classroom. This paper discusses how teaching the Japanese Culture course can benefit both exchange students and Japanese students by providing a diverse classroom setting and having the students learn about Japanese culture by interacting with each other in English.

## 1. Backgrounds

### 1.1 Internationalization of Higher Education in Japan

Internationalization of higher education is a current trend in this global society; as a result, the Japanese government has taken the initiative in promoting Japanese universities to become internationally recognizable over the last 10 years. Matusmoto (2016)<sup>(2)</sup> introduced the following projects:

2009 “*Global 30*”- This project aimed to increase the number of international students in Japan. The selected 30 universities offered degree courses taught in English. Hence, there was no language barrier for the international students to earn an advanced degree at universities in Japan.

2011 “*Re-inventing Japan Project*”- This project aimed to develop educational networking in higher education worldwide. The networking started with China and Korea then extended to the US, EU, and ASEAN countries.

2014 “*Top Global University Project*”- MEXT selected 37 qualified universities and divided into two groups: one was the *Top Type* universities and the other was *Global Traction Type* universities. While the 13 *Top Type* universities are expected to be ranked in the top 100 in international university rankings, the remaining 24 *Global Traction Type* universities are expected to accomplish their pioneering efforts at internationalization. MEXT will support this project until 2023.

Mukogawa Women's University (MWU)<sup>(3)</sup> has attempted internationalization in various ways for decades. In 1990, MWU established a branch school called Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI) in Spokesman, Washington. All English major students at MWU have participated in a fourteen-week study abroad program, which is a part of the graduation requirement, in order to learn English and experience American culture in the desirable environment. Moreover, this university has agreements for academic and international exchange with 26 affiliated universities worldwide and offers the Student Exchange Program (SEP) for qualified students from partner institutions. The exchange students can take courses such as Japanese language, culture, and affairs as well as regular academic courses at MWU.

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## 1.2 Course Objective and Learning Goals

The title of this course is Japanese Culture, and its course objective is that students will gain the knowledge of important concepts of Japanese culture, including cultural awareness and its function in the modern Japanese society. Learning goals are that students will be able to (1) increase awareness of Japanese culture and how it functions in their real-life experiences, (2) gain cooperative learning skills, and (3) express and share their ideas and opinions with their classmates in English.

## 1.3 Participants

This course is offered by the School of General Education which means any student who is a freshman to a senior and belongs to any department can take this course as one of their electives. Unlike regular courses, this course is open to exchange students who are either native English speakers or non-native English speakers whose mother tongues are Chinese, Korean or Vietnamese. This course is one of the core courses for the exchange students in terms of learning Japanese culture.

These are no pre-requisites required to register for this course, but preferred skills for potential students are that students should have a TOEIC score of 650 or above, are expected to understand and contribute in university-level English, and have basic computer skills such as sending emails and using the MS Word and Power Point Presentation.

## 1.4 Language Rule

Since both exchange students and Japanese students are in the same classroom, the instructor sets a language rule in order to create the proper learning environment, “You are allowed to use ONLY ENGLISH in class. Use of Japanese or lack of participation in English will result in a lower grade.” The instructor clearly explains this rule and its consequence to the students at the first class meeting; also, it is stated in the syllabus.

## 1.5 Content

Even though the common language of the class is English, the learning objective of this course is not English language as mentioned above. The objective of this course is Japanese culture, and English is used as a communication tool. The instructor chooses from the various topics of Japanese culture (Table 1) that both exchange students and Japanese students can gain the knowledge of Japanese culture, relate its concept to their personal experiences, and enjoy the discovery of Japanese culture. There are no textbooks assigned for this course; rather, the instructor picks the reading materials from authentic sources such as newspaper, journals, or books. Occasionally, the students are asked to find the articles that they would like to share with their peers.

Table 1 List of topics

|                             |                          |                   |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| National Holidays           | Arts and Crafts          | Kansai Culture    |
| Four Seasons                | National Heritage Sites  | Rural Areas       |
| Japanese Cuisine            | Japanese Performing Arts | Festivals         |
| Japanese Traditional Sports | Japanese Pop Culture     | Historical People |

## **1.6 Instructional Methods**

Instead of approaching this class as the typical teacher-centered instruction, the instructor implements the student-centered instruction by assigning cooperative activities such as group discussions, poster sessions, or individual or group presentations to create an active learning environment. While students work on the activities, the instructor walks around the classroom as a facilitator and helps enhance the bridge between exchange students and Japanese students.

## **1.7 Evaluation Methods**

There are no ordinary paper tests given to assess student's performance in this class. Three fourth of the final grade is based on class participation and homework. If a student misses a class, the student earns no point on that day. Even if a student is present in class but does not show any positive participation, such as excess use of Japanese or lack of collaborative work, it may result in a lower grade. Writing assignments are assigned as homework that allows students to prepare for a group discussion. In other words, a student cannot contribute anything to the group discussion if the student comes to class without doing their homework. It is considered as poor participation that will also affect the grade negatively.

The rest of the final grade is from giving presentations. The students are assigned to give midterm and final group presentations. The instructor provides a grading rubric (Appendix) before the presentation. This rubric gives students clear guidelines on how the presentation will be assessed. There are five criteria such as contents, PowerPoint slides, presentation, Q&A/ participation, and self-evaluation.

## **2. Reading Circles**

### **2.1 Purpose of the Reading Circle and its Benefits**

A reading circle, also known as literature circle, is one of the most accepted cooperative learning activities from K-12 schools to the English as an Academic Purpose (EAP) courses at colleges in the United States. According to Liang (2014)<sup>(4)</sup>, "The purposes of a reading circle include: to develop a reading habit, to improve reading fluency and comprehension, to create a context for discussion and problem solving, etc." Duncan (2012)<sup>(5)</sup> also stated that "reading circles are an effective way of developing speaking and listening skills, active and passive vocabulary and greater proficiency and confidence in reading and writing."<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, it seems that English learners can improve their English language skills holistically by participating in the activity.

Bresnihan and MacAuley (2015)<sup>(6)</sup> discussed that English learners perceived the progress of their own English language skills by practicing specific tasks in a reading circle activity. The learners agreed that comprehending reading material before the discussion was helpful to understand each other; also, completing writing tasks gave the learners more confidence to express their ideas and opinions when discussing with one another. MacAuley and Nevara (2015)<sup>(7)</sup> conducted a survey about the usefulness of the reading circle activities to third-year, intermediate-level English majors in an English communication class. The results showed that the students could understand vocabulary, expressions, and the stories of the selected texts and had deep discussions with peers. In addition, some students responded with appreciation of a positive learning environment created by practicing this enjoyable activity.

## 2.2 Reading Circle Procedure

- ① The instructor sets up the students in groups of four or five and provides a reading material related to the selected topic of Japanese culture. The group members will then have a discussion based on the given material.
- ② Each group member is assigned a particular role and take her responsibility of the given task. The roles are a discussion director, summarizer, researcher, culture connector, and free responder.
  - The discussion director is the leader of the group and facilitates group discussion. The director is also asked to prepare discussion questions based on the reading material that will engage students to share members' ideas and opinions.
  - The summarizer writes a summary of the reading and makes sure all group members comprehend the important points of the reading material correctly before the discussion.
  - The researcher conducts online research and finds at least two interesting or unexpected articles related to the reading.
  - The culture connector finds the connections between her own cultural aspects and the reading. Also, she will ask other group members about their own thoughts during the discussion.
  - The free responder can feel free to respond to the topic. For example, sharing personal experiences, issues, or positive or negative impacts on the topic.
- ③ Let each group give enough time to discuss the topic based on their research. While discussing, the instructor walks around the classroom to support their discussion and give critical questions.
- ④ After the discussion, the instructor asks each group to share a group conclusion with the other groups. The other group members are encouraged to ask questions freely and discuss with their peers.
- ⑤ The instructor may assign further activities such as a writing response, poster sessions, or presentations.

## 3. Results

This course, Japanese Culture, produced some unexpected outcomes that would unlikely occur in the ordinary classroom regarding English language proficiency and cooperative learning skills.

### 3.1 English Language Proficiency

There was one strict language rule applied in this diverse classroom in terms of establishing fair learning environment: "You are allowed to use ONLY ENGLISH in class." This rule sometimes led Japanese students to misunderstand what the learning objectives of this course were. As mentioned above, the key learning objective was to gain knowledge of Japanese culture. Some Japanese students expected to learn how to write an academic essay or give a formal presentation in English. Nevertheless, the instructor only focused on teaching Japanese culture not the forms and functions of the English language. In order to avoid this misunderstanding, the instructor asked the students to read the course syllabus carefully and gave a simple syllabus quiz (Table 2) to confirm what they will learn in this course on the first day of class.

Table2 Syllabus quiz

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>Syllabus Quiz</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is this class an English language course?<br/><b>No!</b></li> <li>2. What will you learn and share in this course?<br/><b>Japanese Culture</b></li> <li>3. What language are you allowed to speak in class?<br/><b>English only</b></li> </ol> | <p>Syllabus Quiz</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Is the class format lecture-based or discussion-based?<br/><b>Discussion-based</b></li> <li>5. Is class participation a part of your final grade?<br/><b>Yes!</b></li> </ol> |
|---|---|

Surprisingly, the end of the semester students' survey provided unexpected results. Japanese students admitted that the strict language rule made them improve their English skills. These were some student's feedback:

「授業中は、英語しか使わないので、英語に触れる機会が増えたと思う。また、毎回課題があったので、英語を書く力もついたと思います。」

“Since we were allowed to use only English in class, the learning environment gave me more chances to speak and write English. Also, I believed that my English writing skills improved by doing weekly writing assignments.”

「ネイティブの学生と触れ合えるので発音や文法を学生同士でチェックでき、さらに日本文化についての学習なので留学生から質問をしてもらいそれに答えることができます。授業内の課題や原稿だけでなく、ギブアンドテイクが常にあるのでより深く濃い授業です。」

“The advantages of working with native English classmates are that we can check for proper pronunciation or grammatical errors between students, it is comfortable for us to answer questions in English because the questions are related to Japanese culture, and the instructor always gives us a variety of assignments that we can interact with each other positively”

### 3.2 Cooperative Learning Skills

To reach one of the significant course goals that students are able to gain the skills for cooperative work; therefore, the instructor implements a reading circle as a core group work activity in class. In general, exchange students have more cooperative learning experiences with their educational background than Japanese students; consequently, the exchange students are able to become an active speaker whereas Japanese students become a passive listener in discussion.

Japanese students tend to be nervous to speak English in front of native English speakers because of embarrassing themselves with their accent. Fortunately, this unfavorable incidence did not happen in this class. Japanese students were motivated to talk about the subject matters in English because they were confident in their knowledge and personal experiences of Japanese culture. Correspondingly, exchange students took the initiative in engaging themselves in the reading circle to make Japanese students feel more comfortable to express their own ideas and opinions in English. Thus, two distinct groups naturally exchanged each other's strengths and weakness through the reading circle activity: the synergy did work. These were some comments from the survey:

「グループディスカッションのため、個々の意見を言い易い。」

“I am conformable to share my opinions with my group members while working on discussion.”

「ネイティブの人と話す機会が多くあり、すごく刺激的な経験をすることができる。」

“It was great experience to work with native English speakers by doing assignments.”

#### 4. Issues

According to the students' feedback, it showed both exchange and Japanese students discovered meaning of learning based on the unique combined class setting. Unfortunately, there is a grievous issue that gives a difficulty to continue this course in the same fashion, which is a decrease of the number of exchange students (Figure 1).

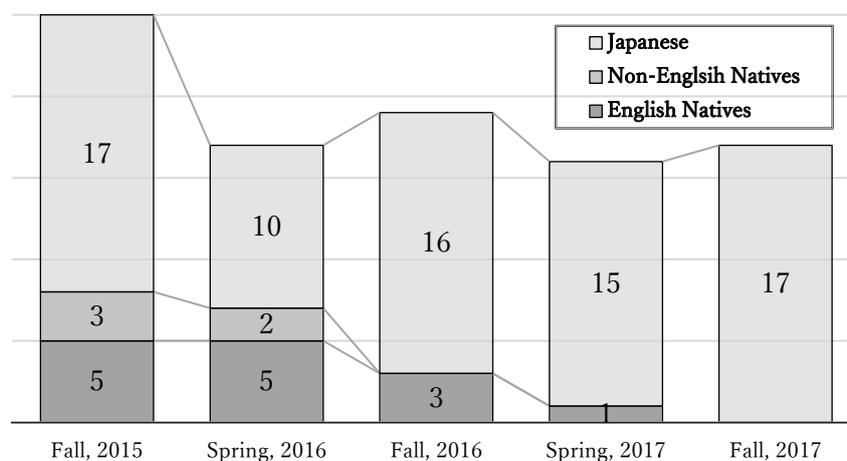


Figure 1 Enrollment trends

The graph showed the enrollment trends of this course for the past two years. The number of exchange students decreased every semester. Finally, there was only one exchange student in Spring, 2017, and there were no exchange students in Fall, 2017. It is possible to proceed with an English-only class among Japanese students; however, it might discourage their motivation of speaking English in class.

#### Conclusion

There are various positive outcomes through a reading circle activity that students can enhance their learning experiences in the diverse classroom. Another remarkable episode is that exchange students and Japanese students establish connections. Some students meet outside the classroom or keep in touch by Facebook even after the exchange students go back to their home countries. One of the Japanese students mentioned that, “We can take classes in English only, because there are foreign students who come to Japan to learn Japanese and its cultures. I could learn about lots of Japanese cultures which I didn't know (I'm Japanese though), and make some friends from other countries! So I'm really glad that I can take this class.”

## Appendix Grading Rubric

|                              |  |   |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Name                         | Midterm presentation   |   |
| Description                  |  |   |
| Rubric Detail                |  |   |
|                              | <b>Levels of Achievement</b>   |   |
| <b>Criteria</b>              | <b>Well done!</b>  | <b>Need improvement</b>   |
| <b>Contents</b>              | <b>4 Points</b><br>Requirements: *Sufficient information *Deeply researched *Write in your own word.   | <b>0 Points</b><br>copy and paste from other resources will be graded as 0 out of 20. |
| <b>Powerpoint slides</b>     | <b>4 Points</b><br>Requirements: *Organized logically *Creative *Included pictures *Clear to see   | <b>2 Points</b><br>Missing some of the requirements                                   |
| <b>Presentation</b>          | <b>4 Points</b><br>Requirements: *at least 3 minutes per person *Speak clearly and smoothly *Included video clips in English, less than 5 min. | <b>2 Points</b><br>Missing some of the requirements                                   |
| <b>QandA / Participation</b> | <b>4 Points</b><br>*Participate in Q and A   | <b>0 Points</b><br>Lack of participation  |
| <b>Self evaluation</b>       | <b>4 Points</b><br>Analyze own presentation critically   | <b>0 Points</b><br>Poor self-evaluation   |

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