Exploring Teaching Assistants' Potential to Facilitate Multicultural Group Work in a Multicultural Undergraduate Classroom in Japan

Rikio Kimura*

College of Sustainability and Tourism, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan

*Corresponding Author: Rikio Kimura Email:rkimura@apu.ac.jp
Address: Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Oita, Japan

This article was not written with the assistance of any Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, including ChatGPT or other support technologies

----

Abstract

Despite the needs for the facilitation for multicultural group work (MCGW) in classrooms in internationalized higher education, research on teaching assistants' (TAs) potential to facilitate MCGW has been lacked. This mixed-method study examined how a course design for activating MCGW, which strategically engaged TAs, influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and students' learning outcomes in an English-taught undergraduate course at a standalone international university in Japan. The results revealed that both Japanese and international students made group work inclusive and international students demonstrated altruistic attitudes for Japanese students with foundational English skills. Students expressed their views in their groups and increasingly bore responsibility for group tasks, but not to the extent that everyone in the group equally expressed their views and bore an equal share of the responsibility. Meanwhile, the percentage of students receiving lower grades decreased. Therefore, the course design positively affected the group dynamics and students' learning outcomes.

Keywords: English-medium course, group dynamics, higher education, Japan, multicultural classroom, multicultural group work, teaching assistants
----

Introduction

Efforts have been made to develop and implement course designs with a range of strategies that activate multicultural group work (MCGW) in English-taught courses in higher education (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Cruickshank et al., 2012; Kitade, 2013; Miyamoto, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Shevellar, 2015; Takahashi, 2016a, 2016b; Yefanova et al.,

----

2017). However, the exact makeup of these strategies remains unclear (Cruickshank et al., 2012). MCGW is defined as group work, in which students from different nationalities collaborate to tackle group assignments. The course design of this study offers another comprehensive pedagogy to facilitate MCGW, adding to the literature. The study specifically explores the role of teaching assistants (TAs) in facilitating MCGW, a crucial part of the course design. Previously, the impact of TAs on MCGW has been undocumented, except for Shin (2017). Furthermore, there is limited empirical investigation into the social dynamics of MCGW (Cotton et al., 2013; Volet & Ang, 2012) and empirical evidence of the association between pedagogical practices and MCGW (Colvin et al., 2015). Therefore, this study examines a comprehensive pedagogy that engaged TAs to facilitate MCGW in an English-medium course at a university in Japan and inquires how this pedagogy influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes. English-medium degree programs in countries where English is not the primary language, such as Japan, are a global trend (Dearden, 2015; Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology, 2019). Thus, this study provides useful insights for such programs.

Below, I review the literature on the social dynamics of MCGW and then narrow the scope and describe the specific context of the course in this study. Second, I will discuss the research methodology and present the course design, including the drawing on TAs. Furthermore, I present findings and discuss them. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the findings and showing the study's implications.

Literature Review

This section unpacks the literature on the social dynamics of MCGW. More specifically, it discusses incipient English abilities of students from non-English speaking countries as a serious hindrance to MCGW, the deficit perception on such students, and trust among group members as an essential factor for MCGW.

Social Dynamics of Multicultural Group Work

Although the extant literature on social dynamics in MCGW—group members' perceptions toward each other and interactions between them—is limited, some empirical studies are still available. The extant literature indicates that the nascent English abilities of some international students from non-English speaking countries are a major hindrance for MCGW (e.g., Osmond & Roed, 2010; Popov et al., 2012). Such international students in universities within Anglophone contexts, such as MCGW, tend to be quiet because they may have limited expertise in English vocabulary and speaking skills (Osmond & Roed, 2010). Additionally, multicultural groups tend to work more slowly than single-culture groups, as the former often needs to adjust to the English levels of such international students (for example, giving them additional explanations for their understanding) (Harrison & Peacok, 2010). Moreover, domestic students in the Anglophone context need to work extra to help such international students in group assignments, such as English report writing (Barron, 2006; Harrison & Peacok, 2010). According to the study conducted by Osmond and Roed (2010), although some domestic students did not mind going this extra mile, other domestic student resented it.

The emergent language abilities of some international students in English-based courses in Western universities, their cultural and educational backgrounds, and negative stereotyping by domestic students shape them as deficits and a problem (Popov et al., 2012; Safipour et al., 2017; Volet & Ang, 2012). Specifically, domestic students see them as free-riders, not communicating appropriately, and being unmotivated and incompetent (Katz et al., 2021; Popov et al., 2012; Safipour et al., 2017). Popov et al. (2012) found that students' cultural backgrounds influenced how they saw and worked in group work, while Safipour et al. (2017) found that students' educational backgrounds impacted their learning approaches. For example, if students have been exposed to a teacher-centered education, they are likely to become good listeners but can be regarded as unmotivated students by domestic students (Safipour et al., 2017). Moreover, Hennebry and Fordyce (2018) argued that silence has a communicative purpose in the Asian educational context. Meanwhile, Safipour et al. (2017) highlighted that cultural factors, such as the Confucian practices where a leader takes more responsibility in group work, led to the lack of contribution from international students to MCGW. Thus, and for example, US university students perceived that Asian students, who were likely to exhibit such attitudes, were less academically competent than European students (Katz et al., 2021).

The deficit perception also resonates with Japanese students who generally possess incipient English abilities in English-medium courses at internationalized universities in Japan, where they interact with international students (i.e., students who are foreign citizens) who have stronger English skills. Course designs intended to decrease this deficit perception and equalize the relationship between linguistic and cultural minority group members and majority group members in multicultural groups were implemented and examined by Cruickshank et al. (2012) and Shevellar (2015) in the Anglophone context and Miyamato (2012a, 2012b) and Takahashi (2016b) in the Japanese context.

Poort et al. (2022) found that trust among group members is essential for their behavioral and cognitive engagement in MCGW. Multicultural groups have a potential for deeper cognitive engagement than single-culture groups because multiple perspectives from diverse members can promote the discussion, assessment, and integration of different perspectives (Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Meanwhile, participation in MCGW led some students to develop altruistic attitudes towards peers of other nationalities, as those students began to appreciate the contributions from those with diverse cultural and background experience (Sweeney et al., 2008).

However, the extant literature indicates that trust-building takes more time in multicultural groups than in single-culture groups (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Providing opportunities for students to work in multicultural groups does not necessarily lead to trust among group members and, thus, effective MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Curşeu & Pluut, 2013). Cheng et al. (2020) found that multicultural groups obtained lower grades in capstone projects at a university in Hong Kong than single-culture groups. There is a need of sufficient icebreaking activities to strengthen social relationships among group members at the early stage of the course (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Poort et al., 2022), to leave enough time and tutorial support for group work (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010), and to increase a sense of cohort among group members (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

Context

English-medium degree programs in non-Anglophone countries are a worldwide phenomenon (Dearden, 2015). Japan has implemented policies that internationalize universities to increase its global competitiveness in higher education (Zhang, 2021). These include the Project to Promote Networking for the Internalization of Universities in 2008 and the Top Global University Project in 2014, requiring grant-recipient universities to construct English-medium degree programs (Horiuchi, 2018; Shimauchi, 2012). International student mobility increased within Asia, and internationalizing universities is an integral indicator for university ranking systems (Shimauchi, 2012). Thus, Japanese universities offering English-medium undergraduate degree programs and undergraduate English-medium courses increased from 20 in 2012 to 38 in 2016 and 241 in 2012 to 309 in 2016, respectively (Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology, 2019). Meanwhile, the undergraduate international students' population expanded from 67,472 in 2015 to 89,602 in 2019 until COVID-19 in 2020 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2022). However, English-medium courses in non-English speaking countries face challenges globally, including students' emergent English proficiency and instructors' lack of student-centered pedagogy (Ismailov et al., 2021).

The considered course is in the liberal arts department in a standalone private international university in Japan, established in 2000, which pioneers international universities in Japan. Private universities have led in offering English-medium degree programs in social sciences, humanities, and liberal arts (Shimauchi, 2012). Approximately half of the university students' population comprises international students, mostly from Asian countries. Most courses are offered in Japanese and English. Japanese students primarily enroll in the Japanese-medium curriculum that requires 20 credits of English-medium courses, while most English-medium curriculum students are international students. Those applying for the English-medium curriculum must demonstrate their English skills through official English proficiency tests. It is generally challenging and requires significant effort for Japanese-medium curriculum students to take English-medium courses due to their developing English abilities.

The considered course is Project Management in Development, an English-medium course that is a major subject for third- and fourth-year students, who are most likely to be 20 to 22 years old. The course examined under this study was held in 2017 and 2018. The enrollment was 35 Japanese and 90 international students in 2017 and 15 Japanese and 72 international students in 2018. I started examining the data obtained from the course from 2022 when I received research funds.

Course Design

The course utilized strategies, such as multicultural groups, group work as the primary mode of pedagogy, the strategic use of the first class, group evaluation forms, and the strategic engagement of TAs as a comprehensive pedagogy.

Multicultural Groups

The groups comprised different nationalities (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Kitade, 2013; Shevellar, 2015). Each group had six members. Students from different countries were assigned to each group. Most enrolled students' nationalities in the course were Japanese, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, and Chinese, whereas there were also other nationalities with the smaller population, including Bangladeshi, Bhutanese, Ethiopian, Fijian, French, German, Indian, Kenyan, Lithuanian,

Malaysian, Mongolian, Nepalese, Nigerian, Pakistani, Filipino, Samoan, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Tongan, British, American, Ukrainian and Uzbekistani. To ensure cultural diversity within each group and promote the use of English during group work, I initially assigned students from major nationalities to different groups. This approach aimed to reduce the likelihood of students speaking their native language during group work and instead encourage the use of English. Next, I assigned students from English-speaking countries and former British colonies, who use English as their first language or were trained to speak English since their childhood, to different groups whenever possible. I intended to have those fluent English speakers lead their respective groups. To prioritize cultural and linguistic diversity within groups, I did not use age, time spent in university, or gender as selection criteria for students. The same groups were maintained throughout the course to cultivate a sense of cohort among group members (Kimmel & Volet, 2012).

For the 2018 course, I implemented an additional criterion for selecting students for multicultural groups. Along with the existing criteria, I also assigned short-term exchange international students, who had been more engaged in my previous courses, to different groups to draw on their leadership potential for group work. However, as several groups persistently lacked teamwork and communication between members, I decided to reshuffle groups at the midpoint of the quarter system term. Based on their observations, I asked the TAs to nominate students who were actively engaged in group work and demonstrated a caring attitude toward their group members as each group's leader, in anticipation that they would exercise leadership. As a result, the number of such problematic groups halved.

Group Work as the Primary Mode of Pedagogy

Group work and trust-building among group members take time, especially for multicultural groups (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022). Hence, the course focused on essential contents, allowing sufficient group work time both in and outside the classroom (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Poort et al., 2022; Shevellar, 2015; Shin, 2017). Approximately 70% of the time in the weekly class, which took in form of two 95-minute consecutive sessions, was spent on group work. The first sessions were lecture-based, with around one-third of the time spent on two short group works. Then, I used the second session on group case study analyses and hands-on group workshops for project planning and design thinking, in which students needed to apply ideas and concepts learned from the first sessions. I kept this course format throughout the seven-week quarter system term. TAs observed that the relationship among group members strengthened because of sufficient time for group work (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

The second sessions' group work required students' *engagement*. Specifically, hands-on assignments, such as project planning and design thinking tasks, made students express themselves easily (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019) and non-verbally through writing on post-its, drawing pictures, and creating artifacts. Moreover, some group assignments could only be completed with the collaboration of group members (such as design thinking), and most of the second-session group assignments could take significantly longer to complete without collaboration (Pham, 2013; Shin, 2017; Yefanova et al., 2017). Furthermore, many group assignments (e.g., group case study analyses) were open-ended regarding answers/solutions and required higher-order thinking (Krathwohl, 2002), necessitating deep discussions to formulate them. These kinds of group work "gave all group members a chance to contribute, based on their capacity" (Pham, 2013, p. 1003) and aligned with multicultural interactions (Arkoudis et al., 2010).

Following this pedagogy, in-class group participation points accounted for 42% of the total course grade. Its breakdown was 14% (2% X 7 weeks) for participation in short group works in the first sessions and 28% (4% X 7 weeks) for participating in extended group works in the second sessions. I verified participation through the submission of group worksheets. Moreover, students had two opportunities to evaluate their group members' contributions to in-class group work in a quarter (Cotton et al., 2013; Pham, 2013), which were assessed and reflected in their participation points. This peer-evaluation process functioned as a reflection process for students (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012a) and incentivized them to actively participate in and contribute to group work. The project planning project was an outside-the-class group assignment (21% of the course grade). Students evaluated their group members' contributions to the project, which was reflected in students' scores of the project (Cotton et al., 2013; Pham, 2013). The other outside-the-class project required students' engagement in group discussions through a decision-making model (21% of the course grade). In this project, each student was tasked with evaluating and writing up the decision-making process of a decision-making situation of his/her group's choice, which was assessed as individual work. Overall, students were individually assessed by a series of group assignments instead of a single high-stakes group assignment (Cruickshank et al., 2012), and their grades largely hinged on their participation in group work. Hence, this assessment structure fostered each student's participation in group work.

Strategic Use of the First Weekly Class
Sharing Cultural Practices in Group

Arkoudis et al. (2010) and Poort et al. (2022) recommended trust-building and ice-breaking activities should be adopted at the early stages of MCGW. Such activities help students acknowledge cultural diversity in their groups, develop intercultural understanding, and formulate group-specific cross-cultural communication protocols (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Popov et al., 2012). Therefore, I covered cross-cultural management and conducted group work related to it in the first session of the first weekly class. I employed the Think-Pair-Share process to create a safe space for students to share their ideas throughout the course (Hennebry & Fordyce, 2018; Poort et al., 2022; Shin, 2017). Students from different countries were paired in groups and went through the Think-Pair-Share process regarding their countries' specific communication/feedback styles, learning cultures, and attitudes toward cross-cultural groups and responsibility-sharing. This familiarization process to each other's cultural differences led students to think about and formulate cross-cultural communication protocols specific to their groups.

The other purpose of this Think-Pair-Share activity was to make the relationship equal between students with stronger English abilities and those with emergent English abilities (most likely, Japanese students) in the group (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Shevellar, 2015). The activity aimed to increase the confidence and capacities of those with basic English skills to share their stories in the safe space created by the Think-Share-Pair process, thereby enabling these students to enact the role of experts and bearers of resources rather than bearers of problems in MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Shevellar, 2015). TAs observed that the Think-Pair-Share process enabled Japanese students with foundational English proficiency to express their ideas in English more comfortably (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019). Sharing their cultural practices intended to increase their confidence in expressing themselves in English (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Shevellar, 2015), thus facilitating more conversations between the partners and in the group (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019).

Facilitation Skills

In the first session, I gave students several tips for facilitating group work as part of cross-cultural management. Arkoudis et al. (2010), Popov et al. (2012), and Yefanova et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of peer-learning workshops to learn such skills as facilitation to solicit the voices of group members with emergent English abilities in MCGW. I encouraged students to apply these facilitation skills to their group case study analysis in the second session. At the end of the second session, students completed the facilitation skills checklist to help them reflect on their facilitation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012a) and consolidate skills.

Questionnaire on Inclusive Group Work

To heighten students' awareness of their cooperation in MCGW, they completed the questionnaire on inclusive group work in the first session. I drew this practice from Miyamoto (2012a, 2012b, 2015) and Takahashi (2016a, 2016b), who asked students, "What would you do if there are students who experience difficulties in understanding and expressing in English during group work?" I complemented her questionnaire by adding the following question: "What would you do if you experienced difficulties in understanding and expressing in English during group work?" I asked students to answer either one of these questions, depending on their English abilities. In the questionnaire, students are required to choose one of the following multiple-choice answers for the question they selected: "Do nothing," "Do something," and "None of the above." Then, they wrote their reasons and/or intentions in the open-ended section of their chosen answer. By adding this second question, I tried to increase not only the awareness of those with strong English abilities, but also the agency of those without these skills and implicitly set expectations for multicultural cooperation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Yefanova et al., 2017).

I shared the results of the questionnaire in the second weekly class with students. Most students answered "do something" to assist or to be assisted (Figure 1). Some of those who answered "None of the above" wrote in the open-ended section that they would support those with incipient English abilities *if* they tried to participate in group discussions, ask questions about unclear things, and seek help. The result is aligned with Miyamoto (2012a, 2012b) and Takahashi (2016b).

Figure 1: *Questionnaire Results on Inclusive Group Work*
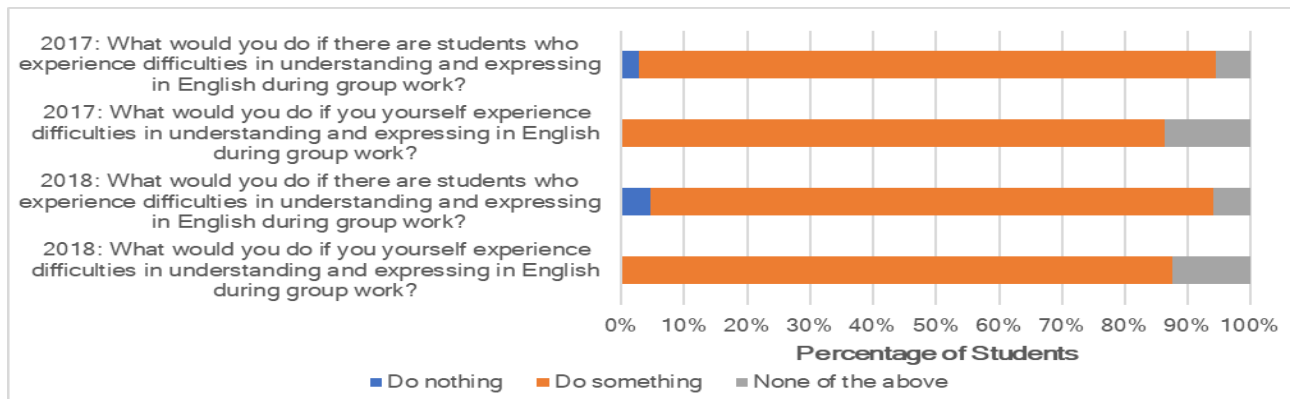
Note. N = 84 in 2017; N = 82 in 2018.

Group Evaluation Form

Students evaluate their and their group members' performance in in-class group work using the group evaluation form (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012b). I modified the form created by Miyamoto (2012b). The form was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Questions included: To what extent did students express their views and bear a share of the responsibility? To what extent did group members express their views, bear a share of the responsibility, and help each other? How helpful was the support from TAs and the instructor? Each question was followed by an open-ended section to write reasons, examples, intentions, and/or suggestions. I administered this form at the midpoint and the end of a quarter in 2017 and 2018, which differs from the group peer evaluation reflected in students' group participation points mentioned earlier.

Using this form, I wanted students to reflect on their and their group members' performance, thereby enhancing their meta-cognition and group work (Arkoudis et al., 2010; Miyamoto, 2012b). Additionally, like the questionnaire on inclusive group work done in the first weekly class, the form implicitly set expectations for multicultural cooperation (Arkoudis et al., 2010; focus group, January 28, 2019; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Yefanova et al., 2017). Moreover, through the form, I wanted TAs to know the performance of their responsible groups from the students' viewpoint, so that the TAs could improve their interventions in groups. Finally, I used the data collected from this form as survey data (mentioned in Methodology) to examine group dynamics and students' growth.

Strategic Engagement of Teaching Assistants

In 2017 and 2018, I hired two Japanese TAs who experienced long-term study abroad programs in high school in Anglophone countries and possessed relatively strong English abilities and two international students who were taking the English-medium curriculum. Cheng et al. (2020) found that the supervision arrangement with more instructors brought about more effective group projects in the capstone course. Those TAs previously took this course and were familiar with its content and process. In 2017, each TA was responsible for six groups, while in 2018, each was responsible for four groups.

I hired both Japanese and international TAs to foster mutual help between them. International TAs asked Japanese TAs to explain concepts and group assignments in Japanese to Japanese students with limited English proficiency. On the other hand, Japanese TAs asked international TAs to answer questions that were asked by international students yet difficult for Japanese TAs to answer (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; 28 January, 2019).

Pre- and Post-Class Meetings

Before each weekly class, the TAs needed to grasp the group work scheduled in the first session and read a case study for the second session and its example answers as preparation. I met with the TAs before and after classes, each of which lasted approximately 30 minutes (Shin, 2017). I used pre-class meetings to ensure that the TAs understood the group work of the day and discussed how they would intervene in groups (Shin, 2017). Post-class meetings were to help the TAs collectively reflect on how the group work unfolded, what problems they encountered, and how they addressed them (Shin, 2017). Meetings also helped build trust among the TAs, facilitating mutual help, as mentioned above (focus group interview,

19 July, 2018; Shin, 2017). Post-class meetings particularly functioned as a space for the TAs to learn from each other; for example, the international TAs learned how to assist Japanese students with nascent English skills from the Japanese TAs (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

Roles of Teaching Assistants

During group work, the TAs mainly facilitated cooperation between students with strong and emergent English abilities. Shevellar (2015) highlighted the importance of "repositioning the teacher role from expert or rescuer to facilitator" (p. 460) in multicultural cooperative learning classes. Cheng et al. (2020) found that the more teacher-centered the instruction was, the lower grades in capstone courses gained by the supervised students. Therefore, for this course, which placed the TAs on the frontline of interacting with multicultural groups, the TAs did not spoon-feed them but facilitated group members to think together to solve group assignments by indicating which concepts and ideas learned in the course they should employ (Shin, 2017).

To promote everyone's participation in group work, the TAs reminded groups that one or two members should summarize a case study in group case study analysis for their group members, so that all the group members would have a common understanding of it. For the same purpose, one TA encouraged the groups to ask each member for ideas (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). Moreover, to facilitate the understanding of those students with incipient English abilities, the TAs asked groups to summarize what was discussed so far.

Moreover, the TAs directly supported less engaging students and Japanese students with budding English skills. One international TAs used simple English when talking with Japanese students with emergent English abilities (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). The same TA often asked students, "Do you have any questions?" and "Do you need help?" implicitly reminding them that she was always there if they needed support (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). One Japanese TA used examples that Japanese students could easily relate to when explaining to the groups (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018).

I encouraged the TAs to figure out their facilitation styles by trial and error. They experimented with their approaches, observed the responses/reactions of students, shared those at post-class meetings, and modified their approaches. In 2017, except for a few facilitation tips, I did not give them any other instructions. Schön (1983) stated, "When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case" (p. 68). The TAs figured out their facilitation styles appropriate for their groups (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). For 2018, facilitation tips that I gathered from the previous year's TAs were passed onto the new TA team, which formed the basis of their facilitation (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019); however, I still allowed the 2018 TAs to determine how they would facilitate groups by trial and error.

Group Evaluation Form

As mentioned, I also used the evaluation forms as a tool to improve the TAs' practice. After students completed the forms, the TAs reviewed those of their groups. The TAs said it was useful to know their groups' problems based on which they intervened (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). For example, a student who looked stout-hearted during group work actually wanted more cooperation from her group members, and hence, the TA encouraged the group members to express ideas (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018). TAs also recognized the overall conditions and growth of the groups through students' responses to the 5-point Likert scale questions (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). Through open-ended responses to the question of "support from TAs and the instructor," TAs could judge if groups wanted intervention and what kind of support was needed and/or effective (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019).

Group Monitoring Form

I created a group monitoring form to help the TAs foster interactions between students with strong and nascent English abilities. The TAs used this form to record the performance of their groups and their intervention for each weekly class. The keen observation was the most crucial task for TAs in their group interventions (focus group interview, 28 January, 2019; Shin, 2017). The form consists of questions rated on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions include to what extent did group members express views, bear a share of the responsibility, and help each other? Each question was followed by an open-ended section to write additional comments. Moreover, there were open-ended questions on groups' problems and successes, how TAs intervened, and the intervention's effectiveness. To provide sufficient data for TAs to figure out

their next interventions, I asked them to record as many details as possible, like anthropologists. In post-class meetings, the TAs shared major points from their monitoring forms.

TAs found that the form was useful for monitoring groups' growth and dynamics and functioned as a reminder for TAs to advise problematic students and groups (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019). For example, one TA reminded a student who did not read a case study to read it for the next class through Facebook (focus group interview, 19 July, 2018).

Methodology

I employed the mixed methods approach for this study. To examine the effects of the course design on the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes, I triangulated the focus group data with five TAs, survey data from students, and the course's grade records.

Data Collection

I conducted focus groups with the TAs after the course ended in 2018 and 2019 and administered surveys (group evaluation forms) to the students in the classroom at the midpoint and the end of the fall quarters in 2017 and 2018. The university's ethical review committee approved this study. I received informed consent from both the TAs and students, who were informed about the voluntary nature of the study.

Data Analysis

I used the convergent parallel mixed methods (Creswell, 2014) for analysis. I analyzed qualitative and quantitative data separately and compared analyses' results to depict both general trends and specific phenomena/practices. For the qualitative analysis of the focus groups and surveys' open-ended questions, research assistants generated verbatim transcripts of those data. Then, I coded them through NVivo 12, counted frequencies of occurrences of codes (Cohen et al., 2007), categorized codes, drew diagrams based on categories (Sato, 2009), and wrote a storyline based on those diagrams (Kinoshita, 2007). For the quantitative analysis of the numerical data of the surveys, I compared the average scores between the first ($N = 115$) and final ($N = 102$) surveys in the fall quarter of 2017 and those between the first ($N = 72$) and final ($N = 70$) surveys in the same quarter of 2018. Then, I conducted a t-test to examine the statistically significant differences among the scores and determine growth in students' engagement with MCGW.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, first, I will examine hindering factors for students who were not able to express themselves and contribute to group work. Second, I will present enabling factors for Japanese students with incipient English abilities to express themselves and contribute to group work. These findings are based on the qualitative analysis of students' responses to the open-ended questions in the surveys (group evaluation forms). Third, I will offer a quantitative analysis of the surveys, which indicates the overall group dynamics and the growth of students' engagement with MCGW. Fourth, I will show how the course design changed students' course grades. Finally, I will compare the qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Qualitative Analysis

Hindering Factors

A crucial hindering factor for expressing in English was the limited English proficiency of Japanese students who enrolled in the Japanese-medium curriculum (27 occurrences). They experienced difficulties in understanding group work assignments. Students needed to read a case study written in English before each weekly class to prepare themselves for group case study analysis, and some Japanese students faced difficulty understanding it. Furthermore, being in line with the practical nature of the course, some of the tasks/questions for case study analyses, such as "Analyze…at different levels," "Establish criteria for evaluating…", and "If you were…, what would you do?", required higher order thinking to analyze a phenomenon, evaluate options, and create solutions (Krathwohl, 2002).

However, the emergent English proficiency of the Japanese students was not considered a significant hindering factor for bearing a share of responsibility for group work (4 occurrences) because there were other ways to contribute to group work than verbally expressing opinions. These ways include writing on post-its, drawing pictures, and creating artifacts in more hands-on group work. Further, although students could not express themselves eloquently, their ideas were still appreciated and valued by their group members.

Not reading a case study for group discussion was the other most responded hindering factor for students in expressing themselves in English (18 occurrences) and bearing a share of responsibility for group work (11 occurrences).

Enabling Factors

Because of the course design, students took the initiative to make group work inclusive. Four behaviors of students particularly counteracted the budding English skills of Japanese students who enrolled in the Japanese-medium curriculum. The first behavior was to help such Japanese students understand group work assignments and case studies. The coding with high frequencies of occurrences indicated that students helped each other by explaining (26 occurrences) concepts/ideas, questions, and group tasks (10 occurrences) to each other and by asking and answering each other's questions (15 occurrences), to ensure understanding (24 occurrences). Students helped the Japanese students understand group tasks and case studies by explaining in simple English words and expressions.

The second behavior was to ask the Japanese students for their ideas. The coding with high frequencies of occurrences indicated that students encouraged their group members to share their ideas (35 occurrences). Related to this was that students helped the Japanese group members express themselves. One student wrote in the survey, "With a Japanese member, we were patient to ask opened-questions to help her express ideas easier." Some groups allowed the Japanese students to express themselves in Japanese, as international students in those groups understood Japanese. The fourth behavior was carefully listening to each other's ideas (13 occurrences). These behaviors counteracted the Japanese students' incipient English abilities and included them in group work.

Thirdly, a kind and supportive group atmosphere also made group work inclusive (9 occurrences). One student wrote in the survey, "There was one Japanese student in our group. He was shy to express his opinions but we all encouraged him and gave him full support." Such an atmosphere can be created by group members trying to get to know each other. Another student stated in the survey, "In addition to discussing about case studies, we talked about something else to get to know each other more." Related to this is that students were mindful of their group members' conditions, needs, and strengths. For example, those good at writing in English edited part of their group reports written by those poor at writing (most likely, Japanese students with emerging English abilities). These altruistic attitudes of international students confirm Sweeney et al.'s (2008) finding that MCGW developed altruistic attitudes toward students of other nationalities.

As mentioned, not having read a case study for group discussion was a major hindering factor for expressing in groups. Students encouraged group members to read a case study before a class, and they started reading a case study.

Quantitative Analysis

Students' Perceptions of Group Work

I compared the results of the surveys at the midpoint (the first) and the end (the final) of the quarters in 2017 and 2018. The analysis consistently indicated high average scores (over 3.4 on the 5-point Likert scale) for students' endeavors to express their views and bear a share of the responsibility and their group members' endeavors to do these and help each other (Figures 2 and 3). The average scores for the question: "I expressed my views in group work" were among the highest for both years. However, group members' perception of "everyone equally expressing his/her views" is consistently lower than students' perception of "expressing their views." This indicates that students expressed their views in English, but some could not do so appropriately.

I conducted an unpaired *t*-test to see if statistically significant differences existed between the average scores of the first and final surveys for 2017 and 2018. The only question with significant differences for both 2017 (t (215) = 2.24, p = .026) and 2018 (t (140) = 2.07, p = .040) was "I bore a share of the responsibility for group work." Students increasingly bore a share of the responsibility over the quarters in their perceptions. While the scores for the "our group helping group members" question were among the highest in 2017 and 2018, the scores for the "everyone bearing an equal share of the responsibility" question were lower than the former. This suggests that students helped each other, but some did not or could not do so to the extent their group members could evaluate that everyone equally contributed to group work. Meanwhile, the questions "everyone equally expressing" and "everyone bearing an equal share of responsibility" received relatively low scores.

Figure 2: Average Scores of Students' Perceptions of Group Work in 2017
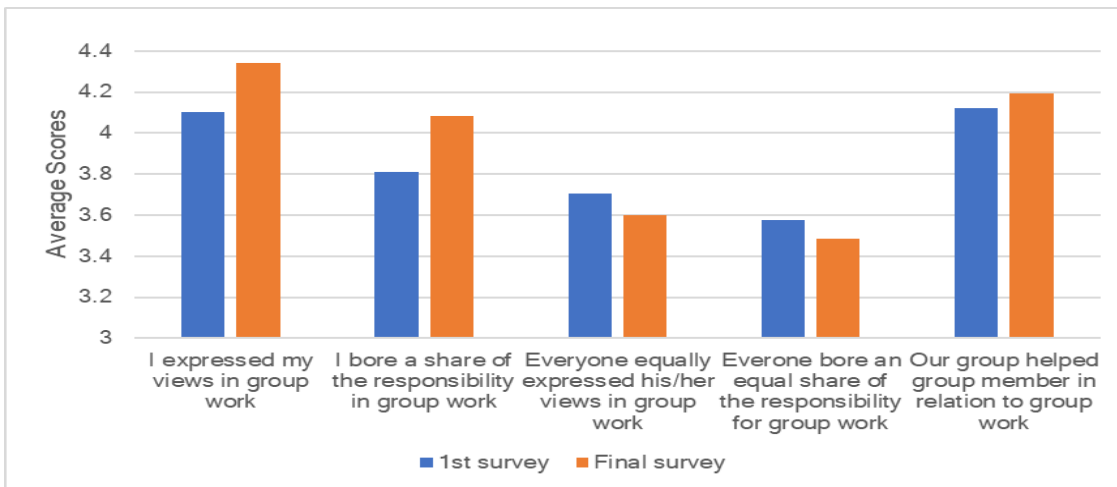
Note. $N = 115$ in the first survey; $N = 102$ in the final survey.

**Figure 3: Average Scores of Students' Perceptions of Group Work in 2018**
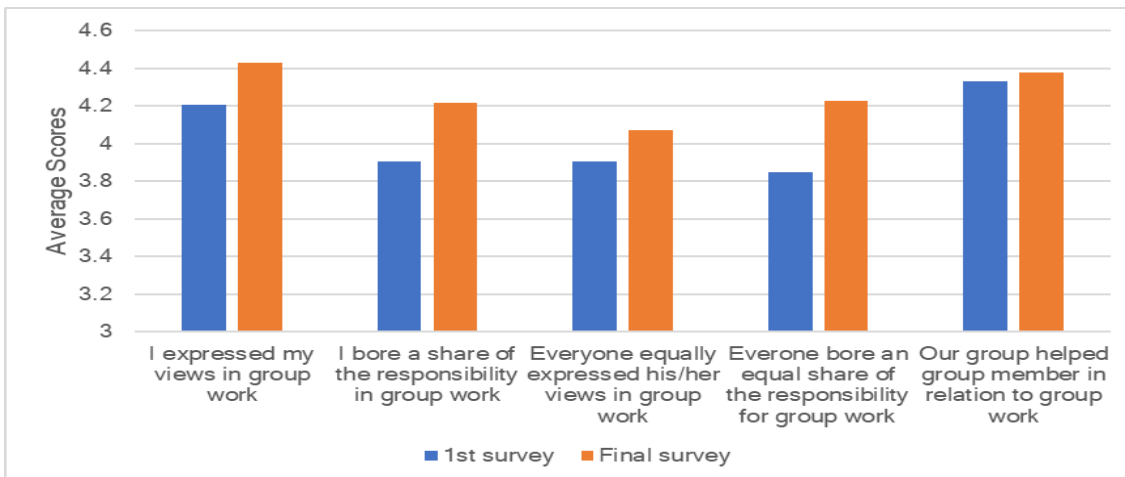
Note. $N = 72$ in the first survey; $N = 70$ in the final survey.

Course Grade Analysis

I compare the course grade distribution in 2017/2018 (when the course adopted the current course design) and that of 2015/2016 (Figure 4). The university uses the following grade scale: A+ (raw score 100-90), A (raw score 89-80), B (raw score 79-70), C (raw score 69-60), and F (raw score under 60). After I employed the course design, the ratios of C and F decreased. Most course assignments were linked to MCGW. Therefore, the course design positively impacted the percentage of students receiving lower grades.

Figure 4: Grade Distribution Comparison
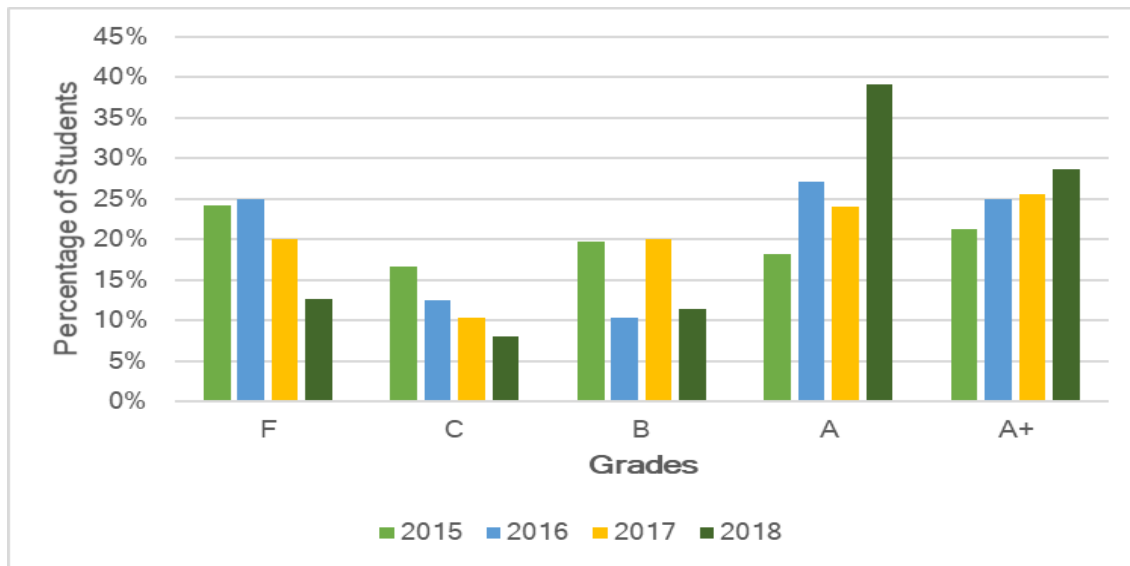
Comparison between Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses

The qualitative findings show the nascent English proficiency of Japanese students who enrolled in a Japanese-medium curriculum significantly impedes their abilities to express themselves in English. Quantitively, while these students attempted to express their views in English, their incipient language skills often rendered their efforts inappropriate. This finding resonates with the current literature, which identifies the emergent English skills of some international students from non-English speaking countries in the Western context as a major barrier to their engagement in MCGW (e.g., Osmond & Roed, 2010; Popov et al., 2012).

The quantitative findings suggest that students help each other, but some did not or could not do so to the extent that their group members could assess that everyone equally contributed to group work. According to the qualitative analysis, international students helped Japanese students with budding English abilities understand group assignments and case studies, asked them for their ideas, helped them express themselves, carefully listened to them, and created a kind and supportive group atmosphere, while both international and Japanese students verbally and non-verbally contributed to group work. However, international students still bore more responsibility by doing most activities, including editing English group reports (Barron, 2006; Harrison & Peacok, 2010), as altruistic attitudes (Sweeney et al., 2008). It is also inferred that the questions "everyone equally expressing" and "everyone bearing an equal share of responsibility" received relatively low scores in the quantitative results because it ultimately depended on each student to decide how much they endeavored to express and contribute to group work (focus group interviews, 19 July, 2018; January 28, 2019; Yefanova et al., 2017). This is indicated by the existence of those students who did not read a case study before a class.

The course design reduced the percentage of students receiving lower grades. As mentioned, international students assisted Japanese students with nascent English abilities in various ways in group work, fostering their inclusion into group work, understanding the subject contents, and agency toward learning. Those efforts took more time for international students but did induce better learning outcomes for the Japanese students (Kimmel & Volet, 2012; Mittelmeier et al., 2018; Osmond & Roed, 2010; Poort et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to inquire how the course design for activating MCGW, which included engaging TAs, influenced the social dynamics of MCGW and learning outcomes. Both Japanese and international students took the initiative to make group work inclusive and international students demonstrated altruistic attitudes for Japanese students with emergent English abilities. According to the quantitative analysis results, students expressed their views and bore a share of their group's responsibilities; specifically, students increasingly bore responsibility over the quarters. However, group members perceived that not everyone equally expressed their views, primarily due to the incipient English abilities of Japanese students from the Japanese-medium curriculum. Additionally, group members perceived that though they helped each other,

not everyone bore an equal share of the responsibility. Concerning learning outcomes, the percentage of students receiving lower grades decreased. Therefore, the course design positively impacted the group's dynamics and learning outcomes to a certain degree.

The course design extended the range of strategies for comprehensive pedagogy for MCGW (Cruickshank et al., 2012). Moreover, the research showed empirical evidence of a positive association between pedagogical practices and MCGW (Colvin et al., 2015). There has been little practice and research on engaging TAs to facilitate MCGW, making this one of the first in-depth studies on the topic. Furthermore, this study delved into the under-researched social dynamics of MCGW (Collett, 2010; Volet & Ang, 2012).

However, I interviewed neither international students nor Japanese students, who would have revealed thorough and nuanced group dynamics. Therefore, further studies on this topic may conduct sufficient interviews or focus groups with Japanese and international students.

Instructors are limited in their capacity to supervise and facilitate group work in large classes (Cheng et al., 2020). Therefore, internationalized universities in Japan with English-medium courses, where Japanese and international students enroll, particularly private ones with large classes, may draw on TAs to activate MCGW. Moreover, universities in other nations with large-sized English-based/medium courses comprising many international students may also experiment with and research this student-centered pedagogical approach to examine its effectiveness in their contexts.

References

Arkoudis, S., Yu, X., Baik, C., Borland, H., Chang, S., Lang, I., Lang, J., Pearce, A., & Watty, K. (2010). *Finding common gound: Enhancing interaction between domestic and international students: Guide for academics*. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2297206/FindingCommonGround_web.pdf

Barron, P. (2006). Stormy outlook?: Domestic students' impressions of international students at an Australian university. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism, 6*(2), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1300/J172v06n02_02

Cheng, L. T. W., Armatas, C. A., & Wang, J. W. (2020). The impact of diversity, prior academic achievement and goal orientation on learning performance in group capstone projects. *Higher Education Research & Development, 39*(5), 913-925. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1699028

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Collett, D. (2010, 30 November–4 December). *Interaction between local and international students using inclusive approaches to intercultural dialogue [Paper presentation]*. ISANA International Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia. https://isana.proceedings.com.au/docs/2010/paper_collett.pdf

Colvin, C., Fozdar, F., & Volet, S. (2015). Intercultural interactions of mono-cultural, mono-lingual local students in small group learning activities: A Bourdieusian analysis. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 36*(3), 414-433. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.823834

Cotton, D. R. E., George, R., & Joyner, M. (2013). Interaction and influence in culturally mixed groups. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 50*(3), 272-283. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.760773

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Cruickshank, K., Chen, H., & Warren, S. (2012). Increasing international and domestic student interaction through group work: A case study from the humanities. *Higher Education Research & Development, 31*(6), 797-810. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.669748

Curşeu, P. L., & Pluut, H. (2013). Student groups as learning entities: The effect of group diversity and teamwork quality on groups' cognitive complexity. *Studies in Higher Education, 38*(1), 87-103. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.565122

Dearden, J. (2015). *English as a medium of instruction: A growing global phenomenon*. British Council. https://www.britishcouncil.es/sites/default/files/british_council_english_as_a_medium_of_instruction.pdf

Harrison, N., & Peacok, N. (2010). Interactions in the international classroom. In E. Jones (Ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice: Higher education perspectives* (pp. 125-142). Routledge.

Hennebry, M. L., & Fordyce, K. (2018). Cooperative learning on an international masters. *Higher Education Research & Development, 37*(2), 270-284. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1359150

Horiuchi, K. (2018). The relationship between admissions on English-medium program and attitudes toward international students: Features and ambivalence reflected upon application guidelines. *Ryugaku Kouryu (Student Exchanges), 87*, 15-23. https://www.jasso.go.jp/ryugaku/related/kouryu/2018/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2021/02/18/201806horiuchikiyomi.pdf

Ismailov, M., Chiu, T. K. F., Dearden, J., Yamamoto, Y., & Djalilova, N. (2021). Challenges to internationalisation of university programmes: A systematic thematic synthesis of qualitative research on learner-centred English medium instruction (EMI) pedagogy. *Sustainability, 13*(22), 12642. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132212642

Japan Student Services Organization. (2022). *Gaikokujin ryugakusei zaiseki joukyou chousa [Research on the enrollment statuses of international students]* [Data set]. https://www.studyinjapan.go.jp/ja/statistics/zaiseki/

Katz, J., Gravelin, C., & McCabe, E. (2021). White U.S. college students' perceptions of prospective international students differ by race and stereotypical attributes. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 13*(4), 135-148. https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i4.2868

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (2010). Significance of context in university students' (meta)cognitions related to group work: A multi-layered, multi-dimensional and cultural approach. *Learning and Instruction, 20*(6), 449-464. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.05.004

Kimmel, K., & Volet, S. (2012). University students' perceptions of and attitudes towards culturally diverse group work. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 16*(2), 157-181. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315310373833

Kinoshita, Y. (2007). *Raibu kougi M-GTA: Jissenteki sitsuteki kenkyu houhou, syuseiban grounded theory approach no subete [Live lecture M-GTA: Practical qualitative research method, Modified grounded theory approach]*. Koubundo.

Kitade, K. (2013). Designing an intercultural collaborative learning activity with sociocultural framework: A new approach to teach language and culture in the global age. *Ritsumeikan Studies in Language and Culture, 24*(3), 117-130. https://doi.org/10.34382/00002746

Krathwohl, D. R. (2002). A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy: An overview. *Theory Into Practice, 41*(4), 212-218. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4104_2

Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': Internationalisation and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development, 30*(5), 647-659. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.598454

Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology. (2019). *Heisei 28 nendono daigaku niokeru kyouiku naiyo touno kaikaku joukyou nitsuite (gaiyou) [Reforms of education in universities in 2016 (summary)]*. https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/daigaku/04052801/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2019/05/28/1417336_001.pdf

Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., & Whitelock, D. (2018). Overcoming cross-cultural group work tensions: Mixed student perspectives on the role of social relationships. *Higher Education, 75*(1), 149-166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0131-3

Miyamoto, M. (2012a). Establishing the relationship of "multicultural cooperation" in a university classroom. *Ibunkakan Kyouiku Gakkai Syourei Kenkyu Ronsyu*, 1-19. http://human-rights-education.ihe.tohoku.ac.jp/content/files/papers/1-A.pdf

Miyamoto, M. (2012b). Strategy to promote paticipation of "international exchange subjects:" How to reduce students' language barrier. *Journal of Multicultural Educaiton and Student Exchange, 16*, 89-96. https://doi.org/10.18910/50751

Miyamoto, M. (2015). Case study of one multicultural class with international and Japanese students: Approaches taken to language barrier and its study outcome. *Osaka Daigaku Daigakuin Ningenkagaku Kenkyuka Kiyo, 41*, 173-191. https://doi.org/10.18910/57248

Osmond, J., & Roed, J. (2010). Sometimes it means more work...: Student perceptions of group work in a mixed group setting. In E. Jones (Ed.), *Internationalisation and the student voice: Higher education perspectives* (pp. 113-124). Routledge.

Pham, T. H. T. (2013). Using group projects as a strategy to increase cooperation among low- and high-achieving students. *Higher Education Research & Development, 32*(6), 993-1006. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.806436

Poort, I., Jansen, E., & Hofman, A. (2022). Does the group matter? Effects of trust, cultural diversity, and group formation on engagement in group work in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 511-526. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1839024

Popov, V., Brinkman, D., Biemans, H. J. A., Mulder, M., Kuznetsov, A., & Noroozi, O. (2012). Multicultural student group work in higher education. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 36*(2), 302-317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.09.004

Safipour, J., Wenneberg, S., & Hadziabdic, E. (2017). Experience of education in the international classroom: A systematic literature review. *Journal of International Students, 7*(3), 806–824. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3

Sato, I. (2009). *Shitsuteki data bunsekihou: Gensoku, houhou, jissen [Analytical methods for qualitative data: Principles, methods, practice]*. Shinyou-sya.

Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.

Shevellar, L. (2015). From bearers of problems to bearers of culture: Developing community in the community development classroom. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 28*(4), 457-475. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916433

Shimauchi, S. (2012). Research on internationalization of higher education and EMIDP (English medium instruction degree programs) in Japan. *Journal of International Education, 18*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.24751/jies.18.0_1

Shin, K. (2017). Subeteno sinnyusei ni Tabunkakyousyu wo!: Ritsumeikan Ajia Taiheiyou Daigaku no jirei [Multicultural collaborative learning for all the first year students!: Case of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University]. In T. Sakamoto, M. Horie, & Y. Yonezawa (Eds.), *Tabunkakankyousyu: Tayouna bunkahaikei wo motsu daigakusei no manabiai wo shiensuru* (pp. 179-206). Gakubunsya.

Sweeney, A., Weaven, S., & Herington, C. (2008). Multicultural influences on group learning: A qualitative higher education study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(2), 119-132. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930601125665

Takahashi, M. (2016a). Case study of an international joint class with international and Japanese students: Learning effects and approaches taken regarding language. *Osaka Human Sciences, 2*, 151-169. https://doi.org/10.18910/56910

Takahashi, M. (2016b). Strategy to reduce language barrier in multicultural classes with international and Japanese students. *Osaka Daigaku Daigakuin Ningenkagaku Kenkyuka Kiyo, 42*, 123-139. https://doi.org/10.18910/57253

Volet, S. E., & Ang, G. (2012). Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for inter-cultural learning. *Higher Education Research & Development, 17*(1), 5-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/0729436980170101

Yefanova, D. N., Montgomery, M. L., Woodruff, G. A., Johnstone, C. J., & Kappler, B. (2017). Instructional practices facilitating cross-national interactions in the undergraduate classroom. *Journal of International Students, 7*(3), 786-805 https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.301

Zhang, Y. (2021). Internationalization higher education for what?: An analysis of national strategies of higher education internationalization in East Asia. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education, 12*(6S1). https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v12i6S1.3077

Rikio Kimura, Ed.D, is a Professor in the Collage of Sustainability and Tourism at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan. His major research interests lie in the area of pedagogy, adult learning, community development, NGO, and social enterprise. Email: rkimura@apu.ac.jp