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# Investigating Pair/Group Work in Japanese Junior High School EFL Classrooms through Action Research

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## Abstract

Collaborative learning in the language classroom is considered by most researchers to promote language learning and, more specifically, second language (L2) communicative abilities (Slavin, 1996; Johnson & Johnson 2009). While empirical research on the subject is still inconclusive, the focus on collaborative learning in Japanese junior high school EFL policy discourse and in junior high school EFL textbooks approved by MEXT is intensifying (MEXT, 2014). This paper focuses on actual classroom practice, and outlines an action research proposal aimed at a) exploring how pair/group work takes place in Japanese EFL classrooms at the junior high school level, b) investigating how EFL policy discourse informs classroom practices ‘on the ground’, and c) determining ways in which pair/group activities can be improved.

## Introduction

Collaborative learning is rooted in communicative language teaching (CLT), but the two are not synonymous. The Berlitz approach is an example of CLT, which emerged near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This approach focuses on procedural knowledge or language ‘use’ in lieu of declarative knowledge or ‘knowing about the language’. The assumption here is that, if learners are to learn the L2 to achieve real-world communicative purposes, the classroom context should strive to replicate the conditions under which this type of communication is likely to take place. In this way, language learners become active participants as opposed to passive listeners. Although the said superiority of procedural knowledge over declarative knowledge has not been corroborated by extensive empirical research, the growing consensus in EFL policy discourse, textbook design and (arguably) in classroom practice places language use as the unquestionable norm, regardless of the context in which

the language is learned.

This is true for both collaborative learning and CLT. But whereas CLT promotes the development of L2 communication in general, learners engaged in collaborative learning must accomplish a given task. This is normally done in groups or pairs and the emphasis is on learner-learner interaction. The teacher becomes a task facilitator or guide to help students do the task.

This paper begins by exploring the tendency in Japanese EFL policy discourse towards CLT, a task which to some extent reveals the problematic links between policy discourse and classroom practices. This is followed by a survey of theoretical issues and debates related to research on classroom talk and pair/group work. We then propose five research questions, which respond to the theoretical and methodological groundwork framing this research proposal. We then propose a research project which takes from action research. This approach to social research involves all participants — in this case, teachers, students and researchers — in the research process, and places a marked emphasis on how these classroom actors express views towards institutionalized language learning, and how these views relate to — or don't relate to — actual classroom practices. Findings from this research will hopefully provide insights into a wide range of issues pertaining to collaborative learning, language learning and the role of EFL education in the broader spectrum of Japanese education. From a practical perspective, these findings are likely to provide EFL teachers with insights into effective pair/group work in their own EFL classroom.

## **1. Tensions between Japanese EFL policy discourse and educational practice**

To understand the nature of, and the challenges connected with, pair/group work in the Japanese junior high school English classroom, we first survey its broader context: institutional structures, EFL policies and the realities which exist within and beyond the English classroom.

EFL policies on English education in Japan have always been situated at the heart of ongoing debates about a) education, and b) foreign language education and Japan's presence in the global community. One such debate centers on the issue of decentralization in education, or the transfer of power and decision-making responsibilities from national to local levels of governments. The main issue here is that, because local institutions are more

closely connected with local educational realities (Hanson, 2006), they are better equipped to implement and manage reforms. But as Bjork (2006) points out, decentralization is often politically motivated, and new proposals are often undermined by local contingencies.

But perhaps more problematic is that greater local autonomy tends to be granted on the condition that local schools meet national guidelines (Muta, 2006), a process which is largely determined by results on standardized testing. This creates a paradox: to gain greater autonomy in implementing policies aimed at moving away from testing, educators and school administrators are forced to concentrate on test preparation, and this overemphasis on testing at every level of the Japanese education system causes tensions between national and local realities. Unfortunately, the current system has yet to formulate a comprehensive approach towards EFL education and a strategy for preparing young Japanese learners to join the global community as individuals ready to engage in the fast-paced, intercultural, competitive business oriented world of today.

According to Ishikawa (2011), Japanese EFL policy discourse is “in a period of uncertainty that has resulted from dramatic changes in the government, shifting political priorities, huge government debts and an imminent need for a major fiscal reform.” (p. 196) Recent EFL policies have attempted to address these growing concerns principally through a prioritization of CLT. While seemingly adequate on a superficial level, this direction in policy discourse is in sharp contrast to the reality on the ground, which is largely focused on language testing (Aspinall, 2013). Most analysts would agree that in actual classrooms, Japanese junior high school students are primarily concerned with *juken*, or high school and university entrance exams. McVeigh (2002) describes *juken* as “the dark engine driving high school culture” (pp. 90–91). Many researchers go as far as to suggest that *juken* is the root of educational failure in the Japanese educational system (Aspinall, 2011; Bjork, 2011; McVeigh, 2000, 2002) because it constitutes the most evident threat to the development of creative and critical thinking skills, two important considerations addressed in recent EFL policies. While MEXT (2011a, b) decries this tendency, it fails to address the core problem of *juken* as the *de facto* shadow curriculum in most Japanese schools (Aspinall, 2013).

But none of this is new. Recent CLT-oriented perspectives in EFL policies published by MEXT echo principles advocated by *yutori kyouiku*, or ‘education which removes exam pressure’. This initiative was introduced in 1977 as an initial response to problems posed by

an overemphasis on testing. However, because of the increasingly competitive nature of education in Japan, testing has remained a driving force behind EFL education in secondary schools. Consequently, educators have had to deal with contradictory objectives: the growing importance of CLT in language education on the one hand, and the ubiquitous presence of *juken* on the other.

For some time now, policy discourse and educational practice have been moving in somewhat different directions (see Amano, 1990; Gorsuch, 1998, 2000, 2001; Horio, 1988; Nunan, 2003; Reesor, 2002; Tanabe, 1999; Tsushima, 2011; and Yoshida, 2003, for extensive discussions on this issue), making the EFL system appear increasingly more fractured. This unfortunate reality is compounded by the emergence of new policies. We should therefore not be surprised by reports that show only limited evidence of successful implementation of recent policies in actual classrooms (Hahn, 2013; MEXT, 2011a, 2011b). Gaps between policy discourse and educational practice in Japan will endure as long as policy makers fail to a) recognize and deconstruct the centrality of testing in the current education system, b) bridge local with national realities, and c) formulate comprehensive policies which are both responsive to realities emerging from increased globalization and aimed at facilitating the complex objectives that EFL educators in secondary schools must fulfill.

As indicated earlier, it would seem fair to suggest that this increasingly strong preference for CLT in policy discourse — arguably promoting the development of learners' ability to use the target language to achieve specific communicative purposes in intercultural contexts — is an appropriate response to pressing needs perceived by politicians and policy makers. It would also be fair to assume that CLT in Japanese policy discourse is not just about language learning but also about broader social and economic realities both within and beyond Japan's geographical borders. Aspinall (2013) characterizes current MEXT policies in EFL education as emerging from current neo-liberal trends guiding globalism — notably those promoted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

But as these structural forces also extend from the global to the local, it is equally important to state that these broader social forces may be adopted, reproduced, rejected or challenged by educators, learners, parents, school administrators, and whoever has an investment in the way EFL education should be conducted in Japanese EFL classrooms. The same goes for policy discourse. Kingfisher (2013) describes policy as possessing a 'social life' and

argues that the recipients of policy, “far from being the passive receptacles that seem to people official policy makers’ imaginations, are actively engaged in interpreting, accommodating, resisting, and manipulating policy for their own ends” (p. 3). Also, recipients of policy may be passive due to lack of interest, knowledge or resources such as time (see Glasgow (2012) for an analysis of the passive consumption of EFL policies in Japanese senior high schools). In short, gaps between policy discourse and practices on the ground may be unavoidable. The important point here is that these gaps can only become evident when policy research includes analyses of how policies are interpreted by policy enablers on the ground.

A wide range of studies in the literature on the Japanese EFL system have so far revealed that the introduction of *yutori ky  uiku* reforms at the elementary and JHS levels has led to only limited changes in educational practices. In his extensive ethnographic study of Japanese elementary and secondary schools, Bj  rk (2011) asserts that teacher resistance to the new MEXT proposals is prevalent because new policies have forced educators to “... re-examine their core beliefs about the purpose of schooling, the attitude and skills that students need to succeed in contemporary society, and the teacher’s role in the classroom” (p. 149).

This brings us back to the *juken* issue. Faced with immediate pressures to prepare pupils for *juken*, most junior high school EFL educators opt for teacher-centered approaches to teach L2 forms. Their preferred teaching methodology for doing so is *yakudoku*, or grammar-translation. While grammar-translation can potentially be integrated within a CLT framework (Cook, 2010), the reality in the Japanese junior high school EFL classroom shows that the L2 is most often presented to the students through their L1, making the L2 ‘accessible’ only through the learners’ first language. Moreover, the resulting product of grammar-translation work — as applied in most Japanese junior high schools — is more likely to be formulated in the L1. This process effectively puts the L2 within a frame provided by the L1, which unfortunately serves to distance learners from the target language.

Furthermore, the solidification of the EFL classroom as a teacher-centered environment, resulting from this deeply-rooted preference for language testing, also ensures that the learners’ L1 remains the primary language of instruction and learning. Over time, the identities and purposes of both EFL learners and teachers become aligned with the *yakudoku*

methodology and with the goals it is said to serve. Language learning becomes less a question of developing L2 procedural knowledge and forging new L2 identities, and more about developing declarative knowledge of the L2 for testing purposes.

These issues have direct implications for a study on pair/group work. Rivers (1987) explains that “[t]eacher-directed and-dominated classrooms cannot, by their nature, be interactive” (p. 9). Instead, the prioritization of a *juken*-oriented system means that teachers tend to blatantly ignore MEXT policies (Bjork, 2011), often without repercussions. As Aspinall (2013: 181) explains,;

It is undeniable that institutions in the public sector charged with improving communicative foreign language teaching have never faced any real negative consequences for failing in their mission. No bureaucrat, teacher or manager has ever been disciplined or punish for ignoring or failing to implement MEXT policies relating to English language education.

Without strategies for oversight, the divide between EFL policy and practice is not likely to be bridged at any point in the near future.

With this broad sketch of EFL education policy and practice in Japan, we now concentrate more specifically on issues related to classroom talk and the specific role of pair/group work in the EFL classroom. We invite readers to refer to Bouchard’s (2013) discussion of relevant facts and core concepts defining the Japanese junior high school EFL context, which provides further grounds for this research proposal.

## **2. Classroom talk**

While many accounts of classroom talk have highlighted the fluid exchange of words and thoughts between classroom actors, many have indicated the presence of rigid power structures in the classroom. In turn, these structures have been identified as potential impediments to learning. As this research proposal attempts to situate pair/group work within the complexity of classroom discourse, a discussion of classroom talk is warranted, [and is addressed in this section.]

Sinclair & Coulthard’s (1975) initiation — response — feedback (IRF) model is a

well-known model of classroom discourse. Mercer (1995) explains how IRF “can be used by teachers to narrowly constrain the contributions of pupils” (p. 38). But while the IRF has been interpreted as a teacher-centered process of classroom interaction, and as an indication of power imbalance in the classroom, other researchers see it differently. Van Lier (2003: 96) explains that “IRF is frequently used to draw on students’ prior experiences and current background knowledge to activate mental schemata and to establish a platform of shared knowledge that will facilitate the introduction and integration of new knowledge.” While the IRF structure is usually initiated by a question, it can be used to achieve goals beyond the simple exchange of information and testing of whether particular forms of knowledge have been received and understood by learners. Long & Sato (1983) indicate that questions can help interlocutors signal turns, facilitate understanding, and perhaps most importantly for EFL learners, they can facilitate learners’ participation in classroom target language use. The authors claim that teachers’ questions, in fact, constitute the most common strategy for shaping classroom discourse so as to promote learner participation in classroom tasks.

However, the fact that the IRF model can only be initiated and concluded by the teacher makes it a clear indication that there is a power imbalance in the classroom. Jaffe (2006) states that the IRF format denotes the indexical relationship between evaluative language and speaker authority, pointing out that teachers and students’ awareness of this relationship

is an essential condition for the conduct of classroom behavior and the management of classroom activities and identities. We can see this awareness on the part of students every time they orient towards the third slot in the [IRF] sequence as being about evaluation [...] evaluative moves in the classroom are moments in which teacher authority is made manifest (p. 6).

In making this argument, however, Jaffe does not condemn the IRF format as overly restrictive, but highlights the recognition of power structures as a very important precondition for such structures to exist. In other words, classroom actors must agree that a certain power structure is necessary for classroom teaching and learning to take place.

The general consensus among analysts is that overuse of the IRF format may prevent learners from initiating turn-taking moves as well as guiding topic development. Van Lier (2003: 96) argues that “prolonged use of the IRF format may have a negative effect on



intrinsic motivation and cause a decrease in [students'] levels of attention and involvement.” The implication here is that learner motivation can be increased by gradually moving away from the IRF format. And in order to achieve this, Mercer (1995) suggests that teachers can employ more comprehensive IRF strategies that elicit reflective observations, request elaboration, and encourage questions from learners, and in so doing, moving forwards active learner participation.

Meanwhile, in traditional classrooms — i.e. classrooms where power is heavily concentrated in the hands of the teacher — the teacher ‘holds’ knowledge. It is her responsibility to share this knowledge with the students in a comprehensible and incremental fashion. In other words, knowledge is not mutually constructed through classroom discourse. Instead, it is delivered by an authoritative ‘knower’ to relatively powerless ‘knowers-to-be’. Traditional classroom teachers tend to put a strong emphasis on summative testing. Learners receive the knowledge presented to them, and demonstrate their understanding of it by passing summative tests. In sum, teachers are generally active agents, whereas learners are mainly passive recipients. Knowledge is not necessarily negotiated but principally delivered from a powerful actor to a comparatively powerless group of actors.

In communicatively-oriented classrooms, on the other hand, learning is a complex and ongoing process of discovery, with teachers acting as guides and facilitators. Classes tend to be structured by tasks that students are required to achieve often in collaboration with other learners. [The teacher holds some degree of authority, yet her main role is that of a repetitive facilitator of learning.] The teacher-as-facilitator is responsible for assessing learners through formative and summative strategies such as tests, interviews, notebooks, logs and products of both individual and collaborative projects. It is in this particular classroom that pair/group work has the greatest potential.

In the following section we explore more specific theoretical issues related to the distribution of knowledge in classroom learning.

### **3. Classroom learning**

Classroom learning essentially emerges through various discourse practices best described together as *guided construction of knowledge* — a process by which teachers and learners share knowledge by combining differently situated mental and emotional resources

in the task of solving specific problems. By joining their capacities and efforts, classroom actors are able to create knowledge, which ultimately makes it a shared possession (Mercer, 1995). But the classroom is more than a place where knowledge is constructed collaboratively. It is also a place where both individual minds take shape. The classroom can therefore be understood as a dynamic communicative environment where identities are negotiated, interrogated, deconstructed, challenged, forged and (hopefully) emancipated through the practice of knowledge exchange and construction.

Classroom learning is not only about the socialization of pupils — that is, the teaching and learning of social rules and key knowledge units — but also about the development of human agency through independent and self-directed learning. Even in the most traditionally-oriented and hierarchically-structured classrooms, learners can, to various degrees, gain knowledge and autonomy because the information they receive does not come solely through what is made available to them by teachers, school administrators and the curriculum. Also, because they remain distinct individuals, learners always retain core agential properties which allow them to make decisions about the course of their learning and their lives in general. Breen (2001) provides a valuable interpretation of the relationship between learners and between learners and educators: “learners appear to be capable of navigating the discourse in ways that reflect their individual purposes and agendas [...] Learners [...] navigate the discourse in two-constantly inter-weaving ways; for learning purposes and for social purposes” (p. 314). In other words, learners locate different sources of information, and develop both their own set of goals and the means by which to achieve them. While they may follow instructions from teachers, their own input is central to how classroom talk is to unfold.

But while these perspectives provide valuable insight into classroom language use as it relates to the construction of knowledge, they unfortunately fail to provide cultural accounts of such processes. Instead, the general assumption motivating the perspectives summarized above is that the democratization of classroom discourse, for example, through the adoption of varied discourse strategies and implementation of CLT-oriented methodologies, is both possible and desired by all, regardless of personal or cultural realities and contingencies. In other words, the deconstruction of said rigid classroom power structures is seen as a universally shared objective. This problematic assumption overlooks the varied histories behind educational contexts around the world, and in the process, serves to de-politicize

education. With this comes the related assumption that ‘effective’ education should be conducted according to a particular set of methodologies, in this case CLT, and that both academic research and educational practices are about strengthening this perspective. As discussed in the previous section, this view is apparent in recent Japanese EFL policy discourse, and to some extent the MEXT-approved textbooks used in junior high schools across the nation.

In the next section we consider the general attributes of pair/group work.

#### 4. Pair/group work

Pair work is more suitable for short and less complicated tasks, while group work is usually more appropriate for bigger projects such as drama and skits, opinion exchange and games (Brown 2007b). For the purpose of this research, however, both types of work are understood as roughly equivalent applications of collaborative work.

The importance of pair/group work in CLT has been identified by many researchers on language learning and teaching, notably by Nihalani et al. (2010), who argue that L2 interaction in the language classroom can potentially be achieved through collaborative/ cooperative learning in which students work together to achieve a common goal. When students are placed in pairs or small groups, they are required to talk and work together towards the resolution of specific problems, often without direct input from the teacher. This type of hands-on work is said to provide the conditions from which deeper forms of understanding can emerge. Addressing issues beyond language learning, Norton Peirce (1995) proposes the notion of learner *investment* in language tasks, and points out that, as learners engage in meaningful L2 interaction with peers during tasks such as pair or group work, they not only share information: they also reflect on their identity(ies) as language learners and as potential L2 community members. In other words, pair/group work not only allows language learners to practice, rehearse and learn target L2 structures, it also facilitates other types of learning, both language-related and beyond.

Mercer (1995) describes three types of talk in pair/group work: *disputational talk* (characterized by disagreement and individualized decision-making), *cumulative talk* (characterized by the collaborative construction of knowledge through accumulation — repetition, confirmation and elaboration — i.e. non-critical collaboration), and *exploratory talk* (char-

acterized by critical engagement from group members where ideas are proposed for joint consideration). While he recognizes all three types of pair/group talks as important aspects, or steps, in the learning process, Mercer argues that learners should strive towards exploratory talk. But for learners to become aware of various types of talk, and to see how this awareness can help them improve their learning experience, teachers need to both introduce various communicative strategies and reinforce these strategies through iterative involvement with collaborative work.

This means that meta-cognitive strategies should be introduced to the learners and applied in a variety of pair/group activities so that they can not only recognize the value of exploratory talk but also successfully engage in it. Expanding on this strand of ideas, Mercer (1995) suggests that participants must have a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ to successfully accomplish collaborative classroom work. Defining it as a “temporary detachment from the real world on the part of all concerned” (Mercer, 1995: 18), he argues that the importance of problem-solving tasks in education can only be recognized by classroom actors if pupils are aware that real-world situations are deliberately misrepresented in classroom discourse precisely because pedagogical purposes must be achieved. Without this awareness, pair/group work can be problematic.

According to Brown (2007b), there are four main advantages of pair/group work. First, it maximizes both the quality and quantity of talking opportunities. Second, it ensures a certain degree of comfort and security for more reluctant and less vocal learners, while increasing student motivation through greater active participation. Third, it highlights the need for learners to develop awareness of their responsibilities as learners in relation to the group, the task, and their overall learning experience. Fourth, it allows teachers to experience and understand learner differences. In addition, Breen (2001) states that pair/group work allows for metalinguistic interaction whereby language is objectified, discussed and analyzed in ways which may not be possible in a non-interactive setting. Again, these processes are contingent on the instruction of meta-cognitive strategies. Without such instruction, learners may fail to see the value of collaborative work to their overall learning.

It should also be noted that not all collaborative classroom activities are successful. As Mercer (1995: 91) suggests, “we should not assume that group-based learning is inevitably valuable.” One prevalent assumption among educators about pair/group work is that, by

pairing students of different ability levels together, both will benefit from their resulting interaction. Mercer (1995: 93) reviews research conducted on this particular issue, and points out that “children who were considered of similar ability seemed to learn better than those in more asymmetrical pairs. Working with a more knowledgeable and capable partner who dominates decision-making and insists on the use of their own problem-solving strategies may hinder rather than help the less able.” Similarly, Nihalani et al. (2010) point out that successful pair/group work does not necessarily occur by simply putting students into groups and giving them a task to complete. Their study revealed that the ways in which a group is formed might have strong repercussions upon its success or failure in individual learning achievement. They concur with Mercer (1995) by arguing that matching students with similar abilities (as opposed to placing students of different abilities together) can facilitate learning and maximize the benefits of collaborative work.

The successful implementation of pair/group work also requires careful planning and creativity on the part of the teacher (Brown, 2007b). A necessary condition for successful pair/group work is the clarification of learning objectives and the introduction of specific problem-solving strategies. As Mercer (1995: 16) points out, “even willing students are unlikely to maintain enthusiasm and commitment if they do not understand the point and purpose of the task they are asked to engage in by the teacher.” Barnes & Todd (1977) specify two criteria for successful pair/group work: a) mutual understanding of what is relevant to the task at hand, and b) shared understanding of the goal of the pair/group task. To this list, Mercer (1995) adds that pair/group work should emphasize collaboration as opposed to competition.

Strategies for implementing pair/group work are reviewed in Jacobs & Hall (2002) and in Brown (2007b). Some of the issues discussed in regard to the design and implementation of pair/group work include:

1. ways to form groups
2. types of tasks (see appendix)
3. size of groups
4. absenteeism
5. starting and ending group work
6. time allotted for group work

7. balancing individual and group work
8. evaluating language outcomes
9. introducing group work to the students (i.e. explaining techniques, modeling techniques, providing explicit instructions, checking for clarification, setting and monitoring tasks)

Other issues in planning and conducting group work are surveyed in Joliffe (2007), Kagan & Kagan (2009), Mercer (1995), and Richards & Renyanda (2002).

Furthermore, both local and institutional factors can complicate the task of designing and conducting pair/group activities in the language classroom. Brown (2007b) identifies three reasons teachers might avoid group/pair work altogether. The first groups administrative pressures, cultural factors, classroom management issues, and learners' limited proficiency in the second language. The second concerns the students' covert or overt use of their first language while engaging in pair/group work, while the third points to the possibility that some students may learn more effectively when working and studying alone.

So far, we have reviewed a wide range of issues pertaining to pair/group work, classroom talk, and classroom learning. In the following section, we list five research questions which survey issues and realities found at both institutional and local levels. These questions remain tentative, as they are likely to be revised in light of insights emerging at the data collection and categorization stages.

## **5. Research Questions**

The following five research questions address a wide range of issues pertaining to pair/group work from both institutional and local angles.

1. How do the recent MEXT policies on EFL education in Japanese junior high schools address pair/group work? How are these policies interpreted or appropriated by teacher-participants?
2. How do the EFL textbooks used (in the classroom where data is collected) facilitate pair/group work? How are these textbooks used by teachers and students?

3. What range of pair/group activities are implemented by the teachers (in the classrooms where data is collected)? If no evidence of pair/group activities can be found, what are the prominent language teaching approaches used in these classrooms?
4. What views do teacher-participants and their students hold in regard to pair/group work? How do these students respond to the teacher-participants' approaches to pair/group work?
5. In light of findings from the current literature on EFL pair/group work, and based on the work conducted above, what inferences can be drawn about pair/group work activities in EFL classes at the junior high school level?

While these questions focus on the junior high school EFL context, they require analyses of a broad range of data found at multiple strata of the Japanese EFL system, from policy design to classroom practice. The overarching goal in this type of inquiry is to locate points of convergence and divergence across this range of data.

## **6. Theoretical groundwork**

The research paradigm adopted in this proposal draws in part from social constructivism, which, when applied to educational research, attempts to interpret the complex webs of interrelated factors that exist in the classroom including the teacher, students, researcher, and institution. It also affords analyses of how culture and ideologies determine and form the different views and expectations held by participants (Brown, 2007a, p. 304). Pertaining to language classroom research, McGroarty (1998) highlights the need for researchers to recognize that “the activity of L2 students and teachers is simultaneously linguistic, affective, and social” (p. 604), and that the theoretical and methodological groundwork shaping investigation should acknowledge the importance of these three domains.

This research proposal also considers Archer's (2004) criticisms of the social constructivist approach. She argues that social constructivism “presents all our human properties and powers, beyond our biological constitution, as the gift of society” (p. 4). From her perspective, the social constructivist approach sees these complex webs of interrelated factors that exist in the classroom as essentially the product of society, and humans' interaction with these factors as made possible by society. The author argues that social con-

structivism holds that “we are nothing beyond what society makes us, and it makes us what we are through our joining society’s conversation” (*ibid*). In response to such criticism, this research proposal explores educational processes in junior high schools by placing a marked emphasis on *human agency*, which can be defined as selfhood, reflexivity, thought, memory and emotionality. Hewson (2010) identifies three ‘levels’ of human agency: *individual*, *proxy*, and *collective*. Individual agency refers to individuals acting on their own. Proxy agency is when an action is performed on behalf of someone else. Collective agency is when people act together as one group. For a more extensive discussion on the need to conceptualize agency in social research, the reader is invited to refer to Section 1 of Bouchard (2013), which outlines a stratified approach to studying social phenomena, events and processes in line with social realism.

In sum, this research project combines elements from social constructivism with elements from Archer’s social realism, an ontological perspective essentially “             with how structure and agency develop their distinctiveness and how they mutually influence one another (i.e., their multi-directional relationship)” (Bouchard, 2012, p. 48). Accordingly, students are conceptualized as actively engaged in creating meaning with other students and with teachers, while bringing their own histories into the process. While the classroom provides both affording and constraining structures, the focus of analysis is on the actions performed by classroom agents as they collaborate towards the creation of a micro-culture which is the language classroom (Nihalani et. al, 2010).

## 7. Methodological groundwork

Bridging theory with methodology, we approach the study of processes found in the junior high school EFL classroom from Breen’s (2001) anthropological research perspective, which defines the language classroom as a micro-culture. In addition, social interdependence theory provides some degree of explanation on how learning is built collaboratively between classroom actors. This perspective is explored in depth by Mercer (1995) who, as mentioned earlier, proposes the notion of ‘guided construction of knowledge’ to account for classroom talk. Classroom learning takes place as the outcomes of individual actions are affected by the actions of individuals and groups, either positively (cooperate and attain goal) or negatively (actions of individuals impede goal achievement) (Johnson & Johnson, 2009, p. 366).



Aspects of action research crucial to this proposal are highlighted by Noffke & Somekh (2011) and Somekh (2006). First, action research is a cyclical process through which data can be recycled and reevaluated, and findings continuously elaborated upon. Results in action research are not conclusive but rather offer insights and new directions to follow. According to Tomal (2010), ultimate truths do not concern the action researcher; instead, she is concerned with “reflection and the practicality, and feasibility of addressing a problem” (p. 15). This view is echoed in Maxwell’s (2012) critical stance towards the notion of causality in qualitative social research.

Second, action research — being a hands-on approach to research — is an inherently collaborative enterprise between researcher and research-participants. Instead of assuming that the researcher is a neutral presence in the classroom, the researcher is integrated within the context being studied. Furthermore, by sharing common aims and objectives, and by bringing multiple and often diverging perspectives towards the inquiry, teachers and researcher enrich the scope of analysis through collaborative work. Considering the dynamic and variable nature of pair/group work, the collaboration between teachers and researcher is a critical element of the proposed research.

Finally, action research is a reflexive process that results in a more profound understanding of the context and activity under focus (Somekh, 2006). Sealey (2007: 643) defines *reflexivity* in ethnographic research as “awareness that the ethnographer himself or herself is a factor in the inquiry.” Lather (1986: 65) argues that, “[b]ecause we are not able to assume anything, we must take a self-critical stance regarding the assumptions we incorporate into our empirical approaches.” Reflectivity occurs at different levels and incorporates all participants in a process that involves “cultivating the habit and practice of critical reflection” (Barbre & Buckner, 2013, p. 1). Ultimately, action research conceives of all people as human agents with the ability to rationalize and change existing social structures in a progressive manner (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

## **8. Data collection and analysis; ethical issues**

The proposed research aims to collect data by means of — from the institutional to the local — policy documents, classroom textbooks, recorded and transcribed classroom discourse, recorded and transcribed teacher interviews, teacher and student surveys, and observations gathered through field notes. Depending on the availability of teacher-

participants, this wide range of data should, in principle, be collected over six months at five different junior high schools in the Sapporo area. Following recommendations for reasonable ethnographic database proposed by Walsh (2006) and Seedhouse (2004), we will record 10 classes of 50 minutes each, for a total of 50 classes or approximately 2,600 minutes (43 hours) of audio-recorded data.

Following O'Donnell (2005), short interviews will be conducted on a weekly basis with teacher-participants. These constitute opportunities for both researcher and teacher-participants to discuss, reflect upon, and record observations during the week. Interviews will be semi-structured in order to allow for both parties to provide clearer and richer perspectives through narratives. The researcher will record class observations and transcribe all interviews and observations both during and at the end of each classroom session. Furthermore, transcripts of classroom discourse and interviews will be reviewed by both researcher and teacher-participants to avoid inaccurate transcriptions and locate problems which may potentially surface at the analytical stage. Teacher participants will not be forced to use English throughout this process.

## **9. Significance of proposed research and concluding remarks**

In this research proposal, we have surveyed issues related to pair/group work, classroom talk, classroom learning, and knowledge. One of our objectives was to uncover the threads which bind various issues together. Throughout this process, we have revealed core assumptions about CLT and pair/work, as well as some of the problematic tendencies in academia to decontextualize core theoretical concepts related to classroom tasks, language learning, and broadly speaking, social research in educational contexts. Overall, it is safe to conclude that a) few academic works claiming the benefits of CLT and pair/group work in the EFL classroom are supported by empirical research (Cook, 2010; McMillan & Rivers, 2011), and b) these works often propose an ahistorical (i.e. idealized) view of how language education should unfold uniformly across cultural contexts. Of particular interest here is the categorization of pair/group work as a 'success story' by Slavin (1996) as a clear example of assumptions about 'the right way to do EFL pedagogy' which seems to persist in current SLA research.

The purpose of the proposed research is, as Deemer (2009) puts it, to "provide an impetus for discovering solutions to authentic classroom problems" (p. 1) and develop a deeper

understanding of the multiple ways in which pair/group work operates in Japanese junior high school EFL classrooms. We have therefore proposed a research project which aims, in part, to interrogate the said effectiveness of CLT-oriented approaches to EFL education. As such, it purports to be an empirical study of aspects of CLT through its focus on how pair/group work actually takes place in real Japanese EFL classrooms. This is in response to Slavin's (1996) suggestion that "research on cooperative learning has moved beyond the question of whether cooperative learning is effective in accelerating students achievement to focus on the conditions under which it is optimally effective" (p. 53). Hopefully, this type of empirical work can provide further sophistication of existing research on CLT, pair/group work and on Japanese EFL education. We recognize that the conclusions about the benefits and drawback of pair/group work to language learning we make are tentative at best and must be informed by broader realities found both within and outside the confines of the classroom.

Chaudron (1988: 1) states that "the ultimate objective of classroom research is to identify those characteristics of classrooms that lead to efficient learning of the instructional content, so that empirically supported L2 teacher training and program development can be implemented." From a pedagogical perspective, the research proposed has the potential to achieve the following. First, provide insight into how group/pair work can be implemented and improved in actual Japanese EFL classrooms. Second, it can also lead to further investigations into the role of classroom materials including textbooks as they pertain to pair/group work. From a sociological perspective it may lead to a deeper understanding of the conflicts between policy and classroom practice. It may also serve as a useful point of reference for other researchers interested in conducting ethnographic action research in Japanese junior high schools.

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## Appendix

Quick Cooperative Learning Starter Activities (Jolliffe, 2007, p. 122)

1. Turn to your partner: ask the pupils to turn to a partner and ask something about the lesson; explain a concept you have taught; explain the task; summarise an aspect of learning, or three important points, etc.
2. Reading triads: pupils work in threes to read a text and answer questions. One person is the reader, another is the recorder and the third the checker (who checks to make sure everyone understands and agrees the answers. When they have finished, they sign the answer sheet to show that they all understand and agree on the answers.
3. Jigsaw: pupils work in small groups and each person finds out about part of a topic then teaches what he/she has learned to the group.

4. Focus trios (or pairs): before a new topic or lesson, pupils summarise what they already know about the topic and come up with questions/things they want to find out — this can be done on a graphic organiser such as a KWL grid (what I Know/want to know/what I have learned). They later discuss what they have learned and may add to a grid.
5. Drill partners: pupils drill each other on key facts until they are certain both partners know and can remember them (can be done with spelling, vocabulary, times tables, etc.). Individual tests can follow and bonus points be given for all members getting a certain score.
6. Reading buddies: pupils read to a partner, taking turns to read a sentence/paragraph/page each and the partner then summarises what has been read. This can also be applied to reading work to a partner, who then suggests something to add, improve, etc.
7. Worksheet checkmates: two pupils complete one worksheet with each having a different job, e. g. reader and writer, but both agree and support each other.
8. Homework checkers: pupils compare homework, discuss and agree a consensus. They staple the sheets together and receive one grade for the group. Alternatively they discuss and mark each other's work.
9. Writing pairs: pupils work together to produce a piece of writing. One can take the role of 'Creator' and the other the role of 'Writer'. They need to discuss ideas and agree before writing.
10. Computer groups: pupils work in pairs: one to type, another to read material.