

The Use of Student Monitors to Facilitate Interaction in the  
Second Language Classroom

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## 要 約

### 第二外国語クラスにおける相互作用を容易にするためのモニター使用

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言語教育の分野において、コミュニカティブアプローチと呼ばれる考え方の導入が優位を占めているので、第二外国語を小グループで授業をすることが普及している。小グループを用いると様々な利点がある。例えば、小グループでは、現実在即した場面の中で学生に実際に言語を用いさせることが出来るし、又、第二外国語で自分の意図することをうまく伝える機会を学生に与えることができる。しかしながら、単に小グループを用いただけでは、成功するという保証はない。小グループが効果的なものとなるには多くの要因が係わっている。これらの要因を調べる研究が行われてきたが、まだ多くの領域において広範囲の研究の余地が残されている。この論文では、小グループでのオーラル練習中に日本語が紛れ込むことなしにディスカッションを続けるために学生自身によるモニターが果たす役割を論じている。さらに、モニターに関しての学生の考えも考察している。研究結果は、モニターが、学習者が日本語を使うことなく英語のみでディスカッションするのに役立ち、また学生自身もモニターは有益だということを試してみてもわかった、ということを示唆している。

## **Introduction**

Over the last fifteen to twenty years, the Communicative Approach to language teaching has certainly become the most widely accepted one. Basically, this concept of needing to teach language communicatively refers to the fact that students must not only learn about language, but also how to use it in negotiating meaning in a purposeful, authentic, meaningful way. In other words "using language to communicate should be central in all classroom instruction" (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, 1996).

There have been countless methods, textbooks, and classroom techniques developed in the name of communicative language teaching. One that is used particularly often is cooperative learning or small groups. Using small groups can certainly be communicative, with the opportunities to use the second language for a variety of purposes in a more meaningful, authentic context. In fact, there are a variety of reasons to believe that small group interaction is especially beneficial for second language learners.

### **Small Group Benefits**

Long and Porter (1985) contribute several reasons as to why group work is a viable classroom tool. For example, they claim that group work gives language learners more opportunities to use the second language. This certainly stands to reason. In classes that are more teacher centered, for instance in classes where the teacher is spending too much time lecturing or using large group activities, the time for each individual student to use the second language will obviously be smaller. Small groups offer the possibility of every student being able to communicate and negotiate meaning that might not be possible in a class where the teacher is the center of attention.

Long and Porter (1985) also claim that group work has more authentic interaction, and is therefore more useful than typical classroom interactions. They point out that typical classroom interactions such as when the teacher asks questions, and then the students supply answers which are evaluated (often more for form than content), is a communication convention not often seen outside the classroom. While form is certainly important and obviously facilitates communication, the content is, after all, the message and it is this content which is negotiated in most communication. Small groups can offer more chances for this authentic negotiation of meaning (Nunn, 2000) rather than the offering of responses to an authority for evaluation of form.

Small groups are also effective in lowering the affective filter, according to Long and Porter (1985). In some contexts this is especially pertinent. For example, it is particularly important in Japan to give students a less threatening atmosphere in which to use the second language. As Doyon (2000) points out, shyness can be a particularly difficult obstacle for Japanese students. As he says, a common teacher complaint is that students rarely volunteer answers and will often pause excruciatingly long even if directly called on for fear of being embarrassed in front of the group. In a smaller group, this feeling of embarrassment can be lessened, and in time even erased as the students get to know each other and feel more comfortable with taking the risks and making the mistakes that are absolutely essential for language learning to take place.

Another benefit of small groups that Long and Porter (1985) explain is that group work can help to individualize instruction. They point out that in most classes, there will be a large amount of variability from individual student to student. Even though efforts are made at placing students, variability in the students is a matter of course. As Long and Porter point out, these differences can range from "students' age, cognitive developmental stage, sex, attitude, motivation, aptitude, personality, interests, cognitive style, cultural background, native language, prior language learning experience, and target language needs" (p.210). They suggest that learners can be grouped in a way that is conducive to meeting students' divergent backgrounds. For example, having students working in small groups according to their interests for a project, or grouping students according to a shared language difficulty can help address learners' differences, which is certainly a step towards making the instruction more individualized.

Finally, Porter and Long (1985) state that group work can serve to motivate second language learners. One way in which instructors can motivate learners is to actively involve them in their learning, and small groups can certainly serve to involve the students beyond a passive role. Once learners are actively involved and taking responsibility for their own learning, it follows that motivation will improve. As Brajich (2000) points out, it is important for language learners to develop autonomy, particularly in Japan, where the students often are lacking in this area. He claims that by encouraging the students to be more interdependent, they will focus less on the teacher. Perhaps this could be a first step towards students taking active responsibility for their language learning, something that all teachers would agree is desirable. In any case, it is certainly possible that an independent learner is more likely to be interested in his or her studies than a passive learner, and "interaction, negotiation, collaboration, etc., are important factors in promoting learner autonomy" (Lee, 1998, p. 283).

There have been a number of researchers and studies that support the use of group work (see Murphey & Jacobs, 2000). For example, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) found that second language learners in their writing classes who were engaged in peer reviews were using several communicative strategies, such as asking for clarification, giving suggestions and explaining meaning. Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, and Linnell (1996) and Klingner and Vaughn (2000) conducted studies which found small group interaction to be helpful. Klingner and Vaughn found their students were engaged in "strategic discussion and assisted one another in understanding word meanings, getting the main idea, asking and answering questions, and relating what they were learning to previous knowledge" (p. 69). Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, and Wheeler (1996) also found the students in their study benefited from cooperative learning in small groups, but noted that some of the desirable language learning behaviors were "relatively infrequent" (p. 253). Assinder also found group work lead to "increased responsibility, increased participation, increased accuracy and sustained motivation" (1991, p. 218).

### **Small Group Concerns**

While it seems that there is a large amount of support for small group work, there are most definitely some concerns that accompany it. For example, when preparing to use group work the instructor has many factors to consider, such as how to group students, what amount of time in class will be allocated to use collaborative learning, and how to prepare the students, just to name a few. Related to these concerns, there are possible drawbacks associated with the

use of small groups.

One possible drawback associated with cooperative learning is the possibility that the learners will “learn” other students’ mistakes, or possibly even suffer fossilization (Richard-Amato, 1988). This fear of fossilization could certainly be a legitimate worry if small groups were used exclusively. Indeed, for any instructor who has used small groups with second language learners, whether in a homogenous or heterogeneous group, a common worry is that the students will not progress without native speakers, so using small groups without native speakers is pointless. However, in a related study, Pica et al. (1996) found that while second language learners grouped with native speakers certainly improved more in their language ability than learners who were grouped with other non-native speakers, the latter still showed promising progress.

Another common worry that many teachers express concerning the use of small groups, particularly with a group of students who share the same first language, is the propensity for the students to revert back into their native language. The reasons for this can be various, and the instructor needs to ensure that the task which the learners are working on is within their ability level, but, all things being equal, this still remains a worry for many language instructors.

This also raises the question about how much, if any, of the first language should be “allowed” in a second language classroom. As Burden (2000) points out, Japanese learners overwhelmingly believe that students should use their first language at least sometimes in class. This contentious issue is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper will focus on how student monitors can facilitate the use of English in small groups in a class in which the small groups are a part of a wider, varied classroom, in which there is some individual work, partner work, large group work, teacher-centered work, and even work where the native language use might sometimes be desirable.

### **Rationale for this study**

Obviously, the use of small groups in language classes is accepted and extensive. It is also obvious that in the case of learners having the same first language, many teachers lament the fact that their learners revert back to their mother tongue, which for this paper means Japanese. This study aims to determine how group monitors influence the amount of time students actually use English in their small groups in which the purpose of the activity is for the students to negotiate meaning in the group in English.

Although there are theoretical reasons for using small groups, and some recent studies have been undertaken, relatively few studies have focused on cooperative learning and SLA from the perspective of what exactly happens in the small groups (Duran & Szymanski, 1995 and Jacob et al., 1996). There is particularly little research concerning the effect of monitors in small groups for homogenous small groups of Japanese college students. Certainly, small group dynamics will vary tremendously, but perhaps, if enough like-research is conducted, a clearer picture of what is likely to transpire in such small groups will emerge.

This study should be read as action research, meaning systematic inquiry into teaching practice in order to ascertain the efficacy of the practice in question, to understand more deeply the practice in question, and to bring about awareness in the specific institutional context as well as the overall educational context (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Hopefully this awareness

will result in adaptation, innovation and positive change. In other words, of course, this study does not have the scope to be confidently generalized, nor should it. Each class context will vary according to myriad factors, including the students, the instructor, their respective goals, levels, backgrounds and on and on. However, if this study is viewed in conjunction with other similar research and taken as an indication of what can occur with student monitors, it will have served its purpose.

### **Study**

This study examines the influence student monitors have on small discussion groups consisting of college freshmen who are all female, native Japanese speakers of similar English language abilities (low-intermediate). The monitors' sole responsibility is to remind the other students during a small group activity to use English in their discussion. Specifically, this study attempts to ascertain whether learners in a group with a monitor spend more time speaking in English than groups with no monitor. This study also investigates learners' thoughts and opinions about working in groups with and without monitors.

### **Subjects**

The subjects for this study were all Japanese first-year university students. All of the students were females enrolled in a basic oral English course. Their English proficiency level was low-intermediate. The subjects were from two separate sections of the oral English course, so the curriculum was identical. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous.

### **Procedure**

The students in this course engaged in a variety of activities, one of which consisted of working in a group and discussing a topic of the students' choosing. For this activity, the classes would generate topics which they wanted to discuss in English. Topics ranged from "most embarrassing moment" to "plans for the future" to "advantages and disadvantages of attending a women's college". Once a topic was selected by a popular vote, the students were put into groups of four. They would have these same group members for a six week period.

Once in their groups, the students would give their responses for the topic one by one. The students were responsible for listening to the other students' stories and to ask questions if they did not understand something or wanted to hear more. The students were given exactly 15 minutes to complete their discussion. The instructor stressed to the learners that the purpose of the activity was to practice speaking and listening in English. Therefore, Japanese was not to be used with the sole exception of giving the meaning to a word if it could not be quickly defined in English. At the end of the fifteen minute period, each group was responsible for choosing which group member's response had been the most interesting, and that person would share her story with the large group.

In the second week of this activity, the instructor explained to half of the groups in the study that one of their students would be a "monitor" whose sole responsibility was to remind students to use English during the discussion. The monitors were chosen by lots. It was explained to the monitors that simply using Japanese to define a word was not to be considered as grounds for being reminded to use English, but explaining, asking for a definition, or telling their ideas or opinions in Japanese was. The monitors were encouraged to take their job seriously and professionally, as theirs was an important role. The instructor also explained and

modeled a variety of possible appropriate ways to remind students to use English. The other students were encouraged to heed the reminders offered to them by the monitors.

Once the use of monitors began, the instructor's role towards all the groups remained the same. In other words, the instructor still encouraged the use of English to all the groups, even for the groups with monitors. The instructor did explain to all the groups that tape recorders were being used in order to conduct a study, and that their grades would in no way be influenced by the contents of the tape.

Groups 1, 2, and 3 were never assigned monitors. For the first week, groups 4, 5, and 6 were not assigned a monitor, but for the second through sixth weeks groups 4, 5, and 6 were assigned monitors. See Table 1

Table 1

	Group 1-3	Group 4-6
Week 1	No Monitor	No Monitor
Week 2	No Monitor	Monitor
Week 3	No Monitor	Monitor
Week 4	No Monitor	Monitor
Week 5	No Monitor	Monitor
Week 6	No Monitor	Monitor

A tape recorder was placed with each group and it recorded these 15 minute sessions over a six week time period (6 class periods). The data was then examined to determine if the amount of time using English in the groups with monitors was influenced by comparing the groups without monitors to the groups with monitors. Two timers were used to time the interactions. In cases of silence, whether it was credited to the English category or the Japanese category, it depended on what language was being used. If a silence was sandwiched between English utterances, the time was credited to the English side. If a pause was sandwiched between the use of English and Japanese, half of the time was credited to the English category and the other half was credited to the Japanese category, and if the silence was sandwiched between Japanese utterances, the time was credited to the Japanese category.

Data was also collected after the 6 week period to get further insight into what the learners' perceptions were regarding the monitors. The learners were given a short list of open-ended questions to answer anonymously. Groups 1, 2, and 3 were given a different list of questions than groups 4, 5, and 6 (see appendix). These responses were analyzed by two researchers to determine common patterns of responses using the constant comparative method as described by Strauss (1987) The commonalities that emerged are reported later in this paper.

## Results

Table 2 shows the respective groups and weeks analyzed. The amount of time spent using English for each group, week by week, is shown. In addition, The average time over the six week period that each group spent speaking English during the 15 minute activity is shown.

Table 2

	Week 1 Time Speaking English	Week 2 Time Speaking English	Week 3 Time Speaking English	Week 4 Time Speaking English	Week 5 Time Speaking English	Week 6 Time Speaking English	Average Time Speaking English
Group 1	9:31	9:58	10:14	10:03	10:25	10:16	10:04
Group 2	7:51	8:12	9:32	9:44	9:21	9:38	9:03
Group 3	8:42	9:02	8:54	9:13	9:48	9:24	9:10
Group 4	8:17	9:43	10:34	10:55	11:16	11:03	10:18
Group 5	7:24	7:43	8:22	10:18	11:39	11:47	9:32
Group 6	8:53	10:23	11:19	11:02	11:27	10:54	10:39

Table 3 shows each week's increase or decrease in time spent using English in relation to the previous week. The total net gain in time spent speaking English is also shown.

Table 3

	Week 1 Time in Speaking English	Week 2 Increase/ Decrease in Time Speaking English	Week 3 Increase/ Decrease in Time Speaking English	Week 4 Increase/ Decrease in Time Speaking English	Week 5 Increase/ Decrease in Time Speaking English	Week 6 Increase/ Decrease in Time Speaking English	Total In- crease in Time Speaking English
Group 1	9:31	+:27	+:16	-.11	+:22	-.09	+:45
Group 2	7:51	+:21	+1:20	+:12	-.23	+:17	+1:47
Group 3	8:42	+:20	-.08	+:19	+:35	-.24	+:42
Group 4	8:17	+:1:26	+:51	+:21	+:21	-.13	+2:46
Group 5	7:24	+:19	+:39	+1:56	+1:21	+:08	+4:23
Group 6	8:53	+1:30	+:56	-.17	+:25	-.33	+2:01

As the results show, the average time spent speaking English by the groups is not drastically different, although the groups with student monitors did seem to fare slightly better in the time spent speaking English. However, this can be misleading since the real question being asked here is what was the net effect of the monitors. Perhaps what is more revealing is Table 3 which shows the increase in time week by week, and the total increase which each group achieved. This table seems to support much more strongly that monitors are helpful. All three groups with monitors showed a larger increase in time as compared to the groups without monitors. Clearly, groups 4 and 5 showed marked improvement in the total time spent in speaking English even though their respective averages don't seem to be drastically better as compared to the groups without monitors.

### **Questionnaire Analysis Results for Groups with Monitors.**

The following section shows each question and its respective common responses. The spelling and grammar have been somewhat "cleaned up" for the sake of readability.

#### **1. Was it helpful to have monitors?**

Fifteen of the sixteen students involved in the groups with monitors answered in the affirmative.

## **2. Why/why not?**

It kept us in English.

Sometimes we forget (to speak in English) and the monitor helped us remember.

The teacher can't always be in the group to watch us.

It was bad because it made me nervous and feel stress.

## **3. What made a monitor helpful/not helpful?**

If the monitor reminds us kindly.

The monitor made it fun, like a game.

The monitor reminded us too little.

And of course...

The monitor reminded us too much.

**4. Would you like to be a monitor? Why/why not?** The monitors did not answer this question.

No, it's too difficult.

No, my English is not good enough.

No, I can't tell other people (to speak in English).

**5. What did you think of being the monitor?** Only the monitors were asked this

At first, I was nervous and didn't think I could do it, because my English is not good, but it was okay after the first time.

I don't want to tell people (to speak English), but I made it like a game so it was fun.

## **Questionnaire Results for Learners without Monitors.**

The following section shows each question and its respective common responses for the groups without monitors. The spelling and grammar have been somewhat "cleaned up" for the sake of readability.

### **1. What did your group do to speak English if people started to speak Japanese?**

Nothing.

Sometimes the teacher would remind us.

We heard the other group (a group with a monitor), so sometimes we reminded each other.

### **2. Do you think it would be good to have a student "monitor" to remind you to speak English? Why/why not?**

Yes, it would help us speak more English.

No, it would be too difficult.

No, we are all students.

### **3. Would you like to be a monitor? Why/why not?**

No. My English is not good.

No. I would not want to tell (people to speak English).

No. I am shy.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

As the results show in Table 3, the groups with monitors seemed to show a more consistent improvement in time spent speaking English than the groups without monitors. Obviously, there are many factors that can influence what happens in a group of four students, but the fact that the groups with the monitors showed such a consistent improvement is an encouraging sign for the efficacy of using monitors in small groups.

In addition, the fact that the overwhelming majority of students who participated in groups with monitors indicated that they found them to be helpful can be viewed as further support for the use of monitors. As the students mentioned, it seems to keep them in English better than if left to the will of the group and the constant exhortations of the instructor to remember to speak English.

One interesting thing that came out of the data collected is that often times for the groups without monitors, if the teacher would remind the students to use English, they would remain quiet until the teacher left the vicinity and then they would slip back into Japanese. However, the groups with monitors showed this behavior much less frequently and some even mentioned this in their questionnaires. This also indicates that the monitors did in fact help them remain in English.

Another unexpected result of using monitors that was found in the data is that one group without a monitor overheard another group with a monitor and this resulted in that group occasionally reminding each other to speak in English. This reveals that students may be looking for a reason to stay in English as opposed to looking for a reason to use Japanese. Perhaps monitors can tap into the motivation which some students naturally bring with them to the classroom.

The responses to the question concerning what makes a monitor helpful or not helpful also have some pedagogical implications. The fact that students place importance on how they were reminded seems especially revealing. Perhaps instructors can “coach” their monitors to remind in a kind or polite way. For example, the monitor in Group 5 struggled for the first three weeks, as can be seen in her group’s small increase in time spent speaking English. The instructor encouraged the monitor to feel free to give reminders, but she nevertheless seemed helpless to do so. However, during the fourth week, she suddenly and spontaneously started to make the reminders like a joke or game. For example, she would say “ahh” and point at the student in a humorous way while jokingly brandishing a pencil, phone, or whatever was handy. This

seemed to relax the other students as well as the monitor, and it can be seen in Table 3 that for the next two weeks, tremendous progress was made. Perhaps the instructor could model reminding for the class in a humorous way so the monitors can see that it is acceptable and sometimes preferable if they use humor.

Stanley (1992) conducted a study examining this very issue of preparing students for the roles they are given in class. His study shows how students who had been coached on how to have successful peer reviews in writing classes seemed to benefit from that coaching. Perhaps the same would hold true here. In any event, it seems to be a good strategy to prepare students as thoroughly as possible in order to promote good habits conducive to language learning in small groups.

Another point in favor of thorough preparation is the fact that groups without monitors were split on whether they would like to use them in their groups, whereas the groups that used monitors were almost unanimous in their positive responses regarding them. This shows that instructors will need to prepare and "sell" the idea to the groups and the class as a whole. Although there wasn't much preparation done in this particular study, perhaps if there had been it would have resulted in even more English usage.

Related to this point is the fact that almost no students wished to be monitors, whether they were in groups that had monitors or not. This proves to be especially interesting when combined with the fact that the students who were monitors initially did not like their position, but eventually grew to enjoy it, even the monitor who seemed to be marginally effective for the first few weeks. Many students mentioned that their English ability was not good enough, even though being a good English speaker had little to do with their ability to actually remind people to speak it. Perhaps teachers would be better off if they dealt with this explicitly at the beginning of the process.

Some students also mentioned that the monitors reminded others to speak in English too much or too little. The complaints that the monitors reminded too little or too much was simply not grounded in the taped data of the small group sessions. Of course there were instances where the learners could have reminded more, or been a little stricter, but hopefully their skill at monitoring would increase with time. At any rate, the learners seemed to maintain a good balance in their monitoring duties. Perhaps a bigger concern were the times when the monitors reminded, but the other students quickly went back to speaking in Japanese. The monitors couldn't be expected to be too heavy-handed in these cases, but any instructor who plans on using monitors as a classroom tool will have to consider this point. One possible solution could be to appoint students who seem to be leaders of a character strong enough to carry some authority in the group.

While most monitors did a good job overall with their responsibility, there were some cases, especially with regard to the monitor for group 3 early on, in which more reminders would have been useful. This underscores the need for the instructor to be careful when making decisions as to who will be monitors and how to prepare them. As was mentioned earlier, in this study, monitors were selected at random and then only occasionally "coached" throughout the process. Instructors considering using monitors need to decide whether they will hand-pick monitors, whether they will use the same monitors every week, how they will prepare and

assist the monitors, and so on.

The use of small groups is a classroom technique that seems to be here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. While this study indicates in various ways that assigning a group monitor can be beneficial for all concerned, the fact that groups will be variable is so important it must be mentioned again. Simply using small group activities and assigning student monitors is not a guarantee for success. Instructors must carefully consider their context and their learners while planning group work. Hopefully studies such as this one can help instructors become aware of factors they need to consider and techniques they might want to use to promote successful small group interaction in their classrooms.

### **Limitations**

Any research done regarding something as variable as small group work is bound to be limited in generalizability, and that is certainly the case with this study and its small sample. Because there are many factors that could have contributed to the use of English in the groups in this study and the fact that this study examined such a small sample, any attempt to generalize these results would be misguided.

Also, this study only looked at the quantity of time spent speaking English and not the quality. While "research has shown that, when learners modify their interaction through negotiation, such [L2 learning] opportunities are increased and enhanced considerably" (Pica et al, 1996, p. 61), the quality of the interactions in this study is still obviously an important factor and would be an interesting topic to investigate more deeply.

Finally, the intrusiveness of the tape recorders in the groups might have altered the learners' behavior. The learners were aware that the recorders were for research and were informed they had nothing to do with grades, but asking the students to disregard them is like telling someone to disregard the elephant in the living room. It is possible that without the recorders, the learners in all the groups would have shown less improvement.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This study raises several possible questions to be studied in relation to group work. Certainly, similar research would add to the confidence with which the results could be generalized. Similar research could also illuminate other factors that influenced the monitors' success that did not come up in this paper.

Another area that would be a rich source for further study is to investigate the quality of the interaction in small groups with monitors versus groups without monitors. For example, if different types of communication strategies were used, or if the negotiation of communication was actually more authentic and effective in groups with monitors would be two especially intriguing questions to investigate through further research.

A final area of research concerning small group monitors which could be helpful would be research examining what makes a successful monitor. By seeing what kind of student or what kinds of interactions are especially effective in regard to being a monitor, instructors could better prepare their learners for the small group activity. In any case, any action research which can serve to further the understanding of classroom techniques would be useful for not only instructors, but students as well.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire for Learners with Monitors

1. Was it helpful to have monitors?
2. Why/why not?
3. What made a monitor helpful/not helpful?
4. Would you like to be a monitor? Why/why not? (The monitors did not answer this question).
5. What did you think of being the monitor? (Only the monitors were asked this)

### Questionnaire for Learners without Monitors

1. What did your group do to speak English if people started to speak Japanese?
2. Do you think it would be good to have a student "monitor" to remind you to speak English? Why/why not?
3. Would you like to be a monitor? Why/why not?

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