

## ***Group Formation and Longevity in the Foreign Language Classroom: Students' Views***

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Group work has become ubiquitous in general education and within language teaching, but having decided to use groups in the classroom the teacher is faced with a number of decisions, including composition, longevity, and level of freedom given to students in selecting group members. Although there is a limited body of literature in general educational research discussing these issues (Bacon, Stewart, & Silver, 1999), there is no empirical research in SLA addressing this. This article describes a study conducted over one academic year, with students in compulsory English classes in a private university in Japan. Students experienced random group construction, self-selection into groups, and also groups working together for a single week, and for an entire 14-week semester. Interviews and questionnaires were used to determine preferences for group formation and longevity and to discover students' reasons for selecting group members. Results suggest that students have mixed views, but generally prefer selecting their own groups, and also changing groups at some point during a single semester. Students select group members based on friendship. Although studying with friends leads to smooth conversation, there is the possibility of increased social loafing. The implications for teachers are discussed.

**Keywords:** group formation, longevity, student' preferences, group dynamics

## **GROUP WORK IN THE CLASSROOM**

Forsyth (2010, p. 3) defined groups as “two or more individuals who are connected by and within a social relationship.” In educational settings students belong to a group at the classroom level, and also within the class smaller groups form based upon mutual attraction or through teacher control. Group-work is an established part of most approaches to teaching irrespective of the subject. By placing students into groups within the classroom, teachers are able to increase opportunities for participation and facilitate peer learning and teaching. Webb and Palincsar (1996) provided a comprehensive review of research regarding groups in the classroom and stated, “it is hard to exaggerate the interest in group learning in today’s schools” (p. 841).

Much of the support for group work in the language classroom began with Long and Porter’s (1985) seminal article that presented pedagogical and psycholinguistic arguments for the use of group work within the second and foreign language classroom. They argued that group work increases opportunities for interaction and also claimed that conversation between two non-native speakers can lead to second language acquisition. Central to the argument for group work is Long’s interaction hypothesis (Long, 1989), which claims that language acquisition occurs when students interact in the target language. Problems with communication lead to negotiation of meaning and pushed output (Swain, 1985), where students modify their language to ensure comprehensibility. This enables students to notice the gap between what they want to say and are able to say (Schmidt, 1990), facilitating interlanguage development, and ultimately second language acquisition.

Although there are many issues to consider when using small groups in the language classroom, the first decisions a teacher faces is how to construct groups, and how long each group should work together. This paper considers these two simple aspects of group work and attempts to determine students’ views on them. I also consider the reasons students have for selecting other

group members.

The next section reviews research on group formation and longevity, and also briefly introduces research by Newcomb (1960), who considered the basis of attraction between people, and how groups form in natural contexts. It should be noted that although some reference will be made to the literature on cooperative learning, the small group work being considered in this paper is of a more general nature, and is not restricted to a cooperative learning framework, which relies heavily on groups, but has specific guidelines in terms of group formation (see McCafferty, Jacobs, & DaSilva Iddings, 2006) for a comprehensive introduction to cooperative learning in SLA). Levine and Moreland (2006) defined small groups as “small face-to-face groups containing at least three members” (p. 2). They claimed that the distinction between dyads, small groups, and larger groups is very important as qualitative differences can be observed depending on group size, and certain phenomena only exist in certain groups. This article is concerned with small groups of three to five people within the language classroom.

### **Group Formation**

The first decision a teacher must make is how to construct groups. Groups can be formed through four different methods; random assignment, grouping based on commonality, student self-selection, and teacher assignment (Jacobs, 2006). Although cooperative learning practitioners argue for deliberate teacher construction of groups (Cohen, 1994), and in an SLA context Jacobs (2006) claims that this is the most appropriate option, in my experience students are often randomly assigned to groups or allowed to select their own group. Ning (2010) describes a study where cooperative learning was adapted for use in a language class in a university context in China, and even within a cooperative learning framework, for practical purposes students were allowed to self-select into groups.

Several studies have considered the different methods of group formation and how they impact student learning and attitudes (Bacon et al., 1999;

Bacon, Stewart, & Stewart-Belle, 1998; Chapman, 2006; Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000), and generally the data seems to suggest that students prefer to select their own groups. Bacon et al. (1999) used self-selection, random selection, and deliberate construction to form groups, and then asked students to rate their best and worst group experiences. The researchers found that positive group experiences were significantly associated with self-selection into groups, suggesting that this is the preferred method by students. Mahenthiran and Rouse (2000) compared situations where two pairs of friends were randomly combined to make groups, against groups where all four members were randomly assigned. Supporting the findings by Bacon et al. (1999), students had more positive attitudes to group work when they were allowed to select one friend in the group. The researchers found that this also led to better performance by the group. Chapman (2006) found that allowing students to select their own groups led to more positive attitudes toward the group and the learning experience, and suggested that this was the best option for group formation.

Although generally self-selection seemed to benefit performance (Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000), a study by Bacon, Stewart, and Stewart-Belle (1998) found that contrary to improving the group, self-selection led to homophily and meant that the group lacked diversity for solving problems. They recommend teachers deliberately constructing groups in order to increase group diversity. This is likely to depend on the purpose for the group.

### **Group Longevity**

Group longevity refers to how long a group will continue to work together. Group dynamics researchers agree that most groups go through distinct phases (Forsyth, 2010), and that a group must go through both the 'forming' and 'storming' stages before it can reach the optimum stage of 'performing'. Bacon et al., (1999) considered group longevity and its impact on how students rated the group experience. They found that team longevity was significantly associated with the students' evaluation of their best group work

experiences, confirming their hypothesis that in educational contexts the longer a group can work together the better it will perform. One of the authors' final recommendations in their paper is to maximize the longevity of groups in the classroom.

Again there is no empirical evidence in SLA for students preferences regarding group duration, although in the study mentioned above by Ning (2010), students were allowed to work together in their groups for the entire semester, and the author claimed that this would enhance the quality of learning in the group. Jacobs (2006) claims that the literature on cooperative learning generally suggests about a six-week cycle for groups, and suggests that changing groups too regularly could be detrimental, as students need time to grow accustomed to their group.

### **Self-selecting Group Members**

If students are allowed to self-select into groups, how do they decide on the members of their group? A search of the literature revealed no studies considering the reasons students may have for selecting other members of their group in educational settings. A logical assumption may be that students will form groups based on mutual attraction, or a desire for a positive academic outcome. In a relatively low motivation context such as that for the current study, where non-English majors are taking compulsory English classes, discussion with other teachers supported the hypothesis that students seem to select groups based on pre-existing friendships.

Newcomb (1960) studied freshman university students in dorms and looked at the sources of attraction in attempting to determine what factors predict friendship. He found that proximity, shared values, and a positive response to initial interactions, were the three central factors in determining who would form friendships. The first and most important of these factors was labeled *the proximity principle*, and simply means that we are more likely to form friendships with people with whom we are in close physical proximity. This is because of increased interaction, which brings familiarity,

and also simple interaction leads to liking. Newcomb (1960) also found that generally groups form from dyad pairs, as networks expanded and groups grew in size.

Newcomb (1963) also found that students were more likely to form friendships with people who were similar to them in terms of general beliefs, values and interests. It is thought that this is because when interacting with those who are more similar to us, there will be reduced levels of conflict, and we will be reassured that our own belief system is the correct one (Forsyth, 2010). In the largely homogenous context for the current study, it could be hypothesized that when interact they will find a large number of similarities with peers, and therefore proximity will be the overriding factor in predicting groups.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Questions**

Although the literature suggests that students prefer self-selection into groups that have a reasonable longevity, there is no evidence of this within the context of the foreign language classroom, and therefore the current study set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' views with regards to group formation and duration?
2. What factors influence students' self-selection into groups?

### **Research Design and Participants**

Data was collected over one year with 81 (58 male and 23 female students) first year university science majors in three intact classes at a private university in Western Japan. The students were taking compulsory English

classes in reading, writing, and communication. Classes were formed based on the students' major within the school, and were not streamed for ability. The average TOEIC score was approximately 390, but there was a wide range of English ability within each class. The study was conducted in the English communication and writing courses, where I was the teacher for all three classes. Each course met once a week so I saw each class of students twice a week for the duration of one academic year.

In the communication course at the start of the first semester a computer was used to randomly assign students to groups of three or four people, and students were told they would remain in their assigned group for the duration of the 14-week semester. The table configuration in the classrooms helped to reinforce the feeling that they were distinct groups (see Figure 1 for the two classrooms used in this study). Although a very small number of students were from the same high school, the vast majority of the students did not know any of the other members of their group at this stage. Lessons were taught following a task-based learning framework as described by Willis and Willis (2007), with lots of opportunities for interaction within groups. There were limited chances for students to interact with members from outside their own group.



**FIGURE 1**  
**Classroom Layout 1-1**



**FIGURE 2**  
**Classroom Layout 1-2**

At the start of the second semester for the communication course, students stood at the back of the room and were given five minutes to choose their group of three or four members and sit down. Prior to selection they were informed that they would be working with their group for the duration of the second semester. Several students were unable to find other members, and formed groups by default. Following on from this, students were given an open-ended questionnaire in their first language (See Appendix A), asking for the reasons for group choice. Classes were conducted in the same way as in the first semester, with lots of within group interaction.

In the writing class I created random groups that were changed on a weekly basis. Before the start of each class I randomly distributed student name cards on the desks, and students entered the classroom, and sat at the desk with their name card. This process was repeated each class so that groups changed each week, and was continued for the first and second semesters. Care was taken to ensure students were not with people from their group in communication class, and to balance for gender. As with the communication classes, students were given lots of opportunity to interact with their group through a task-based learning approach, and there was a large element of group work. Thus after one year students experienced three

different kinds of group in terms of duration and formation as shown in Table 1 below.

**TABLE 1**  
**Groupings for Communication and Writing Classes**

Course	Random	Self-selection	Fixed14 weeks	Weekly change
Communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Writing	Yes	No	No	Yes

### Interviews

After the first semester, 12 students were interviewed with regards their preference for group work. At the end of the second semester, 8 students were interviewed. The interviews were formal (Spradley, 1979), and semi-structured in order to allow for consistency and yet enable follow up questions for clarification (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 185).

Interviews are used widely within SLA (Talmy & Richards, 2010), but often there is no clear explanation of the context, or the choice of interviewee. Interviews are presented as excerpts or quotes from students (Talmy & Richards, 2010) without considering the interview as interaction. In the next section I will attempt to give background to the interviews, and when treating interview data will attempt to provide as comprehensive a report of the data as possible, addressing the issues raised by Talmy and Richards (2010).

The interviews were conducted as part of a larger doctoral research project, and therefore the interviewees were selected based on criteria specific to that study. This meant that four members of the same group were interviewed following the interview procedure provided in Appendix B. Students from the same group of four were chosen in part because of my wish to investigate student leadership within each group, and groups were selected that were deemed to be cooperative and likely to be willing to take part in an interview. Students gave me their email addresses and then I sent group emails trying to

organize a suitable time to meet. Students were assured beforehand that the interviews were optional and would in no way affect their grade for the course. Individual interviews were scheduled on a first come first serve basis and all occurred after the final class of the semester.

Interviews were conducted in my office or in the students' regular classrooms depending on availability. Students were invited in and asked to complete a consent form. I explained the purpose of the interview and that it was related to my research, without giving too much information that could potentially influence responses. First semester interviews were recorded using an IC recorder, and for the second semester a video camera was added to provide a more complete record of the interview. Interviews lasted 20-25 minutes, and were conducted entirely in the students' first language, Japanese, in which I am proficient.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Issues regarding the optimum detail for transcriptions remain controversial (Potter & Hepburn, 2005; Smith, Hollway, & Mishler, 2005), and I opted for a level of detail that I felt accurately recreated the conversation, but was accessible to novice researchers not familiar with the conventions of conversation analysis (see Appendix C for transcription key). Student names have been changed.

### **Students' Views on Group Formation**

In the first semester students were not asked about preferences for group formation as they had only experienced groups constructed by the teacher. The eight students interviewed in the second semester were asked, and four students stated that they preferred self-selection, two students wanted the teacher to decide, and the remaining two students felt that the teacher should decide in semester 1 and the students in semester 2. Reasons for preferences

are explained below.

The majority of students said that they preferred being given the choice of whom to work with, as they were able to select friends and this meant that conversation was smooth and they could relax more. This is summed up in the interview with Ryota.

Excerpt 1. Ryota interview

- 1 P: konkai ha ichi gakki ha boku ha kimete ni gakki ha jibun de  
group kimeta kedo/  
(this time is first semester I decided second semester you  
decided your groups)
- 2 R: =un  
(yeah)
- 3 P: dochi no hou ga..  
(which one is )
- 4 R: un  
(yeah)
- 5 P: ii desuka//  
(best?)
- 6 R: sou desu ne, .. yappa jibun ga kimeru hou ga ii kana to  
omoimasu// (3)  
(okay, yes. I think it is best to choose yourself)
- 7 P: {[laughing] nande?}  
(why?)
- 8 R: ah ano..kaiwa ga shiyasuinde sono.. [cough] (2) ano nanto iu  
ka itumo doori no sono kaiwa to iuno ga eigo de dekirunde  
sono jishin mo agariyasui [nods head]  
(ah erm it is easy to talk that erm what should I say you can  
have conversation as always, you can have that in English so  
it increases your confidence)
- 9 P: =un  
(okay)

- 10 R: =to omoushi/  
(I think)
- 11 P: un un  
(yeah)
- 12 R: so desu ne//  
(yeah, that's it)

Ryota believes that students being allowed to choose their own groups is the best option and states this clearly in line six. Following my laugh and direct question he explains that being with friends means that you can relax and have your usual conversation, only in English rather than Japanese, and he believes that this will increase confidence. Other students supported this view that being familiar with group members meant that they were comfortable and so conversation would flow more comfortably. Anxiety has been shown to be an important individual difference variable within SLA (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), generally resulting in lowered performance, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that working with friends is beneficial for students. Students seemed to believe that lowered anxiety would make conversation easier, and this is particularly important at low levels of proficiency.

Yuki, a student from the same group as Ryota, claimed that although self-selection makes the course easier, you improve more when the teacher chooses. This view is supported by Kazu, who was a member of a different class and group. Observation, interview and questionnaire showed that Kazu was a leader in his first group, taking on a strong leadership role and dominating conversation, and yet in the second semester he became quite passive and was happy to let others dominate the conversation. The following is an excerpt from his interview conducted at the end of the academic year.

Excerpt 2. Interview with Kazu

- 1 P: un ok chotto betsu yakedo kono jugyou de juu boku ha group  
kimerunka jibun de kimerunka dochi no hou ga ii ka na//

- (okay erm on a different note, in this class ten I choose the group or you choose the group I wonder which is best?)
- 2 K: un/  
(yeah)
- 3 P: =ichi gakki ha boku ha kimete yatta kedo ni gakki ha group ha jibun orankatta kedo jibun..  
(In semester 1 I chose it but in semester two the you chose you weren't there but you)
- 4 K: ah sensei ga kimeta hou ga ii to omoimasu/  
(ah, I think it is best if the teacher chooses)
- 5 P: nande/  
(why?)
- 6 K: eh nandaro nanka (2) sorekoso sensei ga kimetahou ga minna ga jibun kara (2) jibun ga nanka yaranake dou sureba ii no ka sensei ga kimereba jibun de dou sureba ii no ka mitsukete ukeru no kana to yappari nakai doushi de jibun de kimechau to amaichau tokoro mo aru no kana  
(erm why erm when the teacher chooses everyone thinks what should I do if the teacher decides you have to think for yourself and find what you have to do I guess and when everyone in the group are your friends there is an element taking advantage of them maybe)
- 7 P: =ahh okay
- 8 K: tte hai//  
(there is)
- 9 P: =okay de saigo no shitumon gurai ni naru kedo  
(okay then this is probably the last question but)

Although in another part of the interview Kazu was keen to insist that he had tried hard in the second semester, he admitted feeling that he could leave more to his group, and did not feel as much pressure to lead. In line 6 above he admits that there is a tendency to take advantage of a group when it is

made up of close friends, and this was clear in his behavior. Video observation showed that Kazu went from active leader to passive follower when working with his friends. At the end of each semester students took part in a 10-minute conversation test in their group, which was recorded. Kazu spoke for 156 seconds (26% of available speaking time) in the first semester, and for 83 seconds (14% of available speaking time) in the second semester, meaning that his participation in the conversation almost halved. This behavior is typical of social loafing, where a member of a group will rely on others and not fulfill their own duties within a group (Forsyth, 2010). This is common in groups of more than two people and is a well-documented phenomenon within group psychology, but again has not been investigated within our field.

The tendency for students generally to coast in the second semester was observable through the degree to which Japanese was used when groups were talking. As the teacher I encouraged maximum use of English and reminded students that part of their grade depended on speaking English in class. There was, however, a noticeable increase in Japanese in the second semester, when students were with friends. This may be a result of students reverting to their usual method of communication with their interlocutors. As the study was not experimental in design there is also the possibility that use of Japanese was a result of students realizing that it was relatively easy to pass the course in the first semester, and therefore generally slightly lower motivation in the second semester, but the increase in use of first language was very noticeable in my role as the teacher of the classes.

As has been well documented, in Japan there is a strong pressure to conform to the norms of the group. The idea of "*amae*" has been documented by Doi (1973) and is an accepted and recognized part of Japanese culture. The Shinwa Eichujiten Dictionary offers the following definition 'a tendency to depend too readily on somebody who is close to and older than one.' This behavior is often associated with the child-parent relationship, but can also apply to friendships where people may take liberties and expect special dispensation from people with whom they have a close-relationship. As a

result when students are in a group with people that they know they may be more likely to let others take care of them, leading to an increase in social loafing, and a tendency to allow more active members of the group to carry other members, as was clearly the case with Kazu.

In the context of the current study although most students were relatively low in English proficiency, they were generally reasonably conscientious and the prevailing atmosphere in the classroom was to speak English when on task. This meant that when students did not know each other well they generally observed the norm and spoke English. When students knew each other well, although relaxation may have led to smoother conversation, there was a greater danger that students felt less pressure to make an effort to use English, and therefore relied more heavily on their L1. Although L1 use has been shown to have some advantages in the foreign language classroom (Leeming, 2011), in an EFL environment most teachers' goal is to maximize use of the second language. The results here suggest that allowing students to select group members potentially leads to an increase in use of first language.

Although research in general psychology has found that allowing students to select their own group can lead to higher levels of performance (Mahenthiran & Rouse, 2000), this is not necessarily supported by the findings of this study, where some students admitted that with friends they would be less likely to make an effort to speak English in class. Bacon, Stewart, and Stewart-Belle (1998) claim that self-selection into groups increases homophily, and that this loss of diversity can actually be detrimental to the group. A clear example of this in the current study is the fact that when allowed to self-select, groups were never mixed-gender, immediately limiting diversity, which can be helpful for discussion in a task-based style of teaching.

Two students said that choice depended on the semester in question, and that in the first semester students did not know each other anyway so having the teacher decide was efficient as they would have struggled to form groups. However, by the second semester they knew each other well enough to select their own groups. It was also suggested by one student that although he

personally preferred choosing his own group, it tended to mean that shy students or students who are often absent will end up in the same group by default, and that this is unfair for these students, as the groups will not be well-balanced and may be disrupted by absenteeism.

### **Student Views on Group Longevity**

Students in both the first and second semester interviews were asked how long a group should work together. In the first semester seven students preferred working in the same group for the entire semester, while five students said that changing groups at some point in the semester was better. In contrast, in the second semester four students said that changing during the semester was preferable, while only one student wanted to remain in the same group for the entire semester. One student stated that the same group was best in the first semester, but for the second semester it would have been better to change groups at some point. The remaining two students were unsure, claiming that there were benefits to both approaches.

A number of students felt that working together for an entire semester was beneficial as this enabled them to really get to know other group members and conversation could then become smooth, and they were able to relax and enjoy the class. The majority of students said that changing groups at some point was good, and in the next interview excerpt Chiho offers an explanation of why.

#### Excerpt 3. Interview with Chiho

- 1 P:    okay kono.. yon ano saki chotto yutta kedo kono juuyon shuukan onaji group de yaru no ha ma maishuu menba kaetari tochuu de kaetari no aru kedo kono juuyon shuukan de zuuto yaru no ha dou omoimasu ka//  
          (okay this four erm I mentioned it a little bit before but working with the same group for fourteen weeks is erm changing members every week or part way through there are

- various ways but staying in the same group for fourteen weeks  
what do you think of it?)
- 2 C: un.. hanasu naiyou ha maikai chigau kedo yappari menba ga  
ishou ya to.. nanka.. hanashi no neta ga nakunaru to onaji koto  
hanshitari  
(okay although the topic of conversation changes each week if  
the members of the group are the same we run out of things to  
say or we repeat our conversations)
- 3 P: =un  
(yeah)
- 4 C: =to ka so iu no yoku aru kara nanka shizenmi ha amari nai to  
omou kedo hajime no uchi ha yappari nanka nareta hito to  
yaru hou ga.. un.. shaberiyasui to ha omou kedo tsugi kara ha  
betsu ni maikai guruupu kaete mo hanaseru kana to omou//  
(and stuff we often have that kind of think so kinda there isn't  
a sense of freshness I think although at first it is easier to  
speak with people who you got used to I think but next time I  
think even if you change the groups each time people will be  
able to speak probably)
- 5 P: un okay okay saigoro hen ni naru kedo/  
(okay okay this is almost the end but)

Chiho was interviewed at the end of the first semester and believed that if students were together for too long then they ran out of things to say, and the conversation generally became a little stale. She clearly supports changing groups regularly, and although she feels that there are benefits to fixed groups she feels that in the second semester it would be okay to mix groups on a weekly basis. Perhaps if the students have bonded at the classroom group level then there will be little resistance to changing groups regularly in the second semester. Chiho's class had a very positive atmosphere and therefore she seemed comfortable working with anyone in the class.

A number of students echoed the view that by working together for

prolonged periods in the same group they ran out of topics of conversation with their group. As the students in the current study were all relatively low in proficiency, they struggled to go beyond very simple basic conversation, and therefore expanding conversation was challenging. At the start of communication class each week the students were given the chance to practice conversation by discussing their previous weekend for 10 minutes in groups, and some students seemed to feel that once you knew the routine for the people in your group it became hard to make conversation. This result is likely to be quite different depending on the proficiency of learners. High-level students are comfortable with a wide range of conversation topics and therefore have no difficulty making conversation, and may therefore be happy to work with the same group for a prolonged period.

Students seemed to feel that changing on a weekly basis was not beneficial as there was a period where you had to get used to your group before you could enjoy conversation, and the majority of students seemed to believe that changing on a four-week basis, or in the middle of each semester was preferable, as this adds freshness to the group experience. It should be noted that I as the teacher had kept the students in the same group for each semester in communication class, and changed each week in writing, but the students wanted something in between these two approaches.

Researchers agree that all groups go through distinct phases in their development (see Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) chapter three for a succinct description). This means that prior to performing well as a group they must first form and become a group, and then go through initial norming and transition phases. Considering the time constraints placed on groups in the language classroom, it would therefore seem beneficial to have groups stay together for the duration of the semester, or even the whole academic year if possible. Students in this study wanted change and perhaps due to the deliberately repetitive nature of the conversation in the communication classes, some students felt that a change of group would give them an opportunity to have fresh input and would reduce the feeling of repetition, supporting the claim by Jacobs (2006) that rotation on a six week basis is

preferable. This is seen as a happy medium by students, allowing them to grow accustomed to group members, but also to have fresh interactions with a variety of students.

Although not directly related to the research questions, I was interested in the possibility that student preferences were a result of language proficiency, and also how preferences may influence their participation in conversation. Students in the current study were given a dictation test as a measure of English language proficiency (Oller, 1971), and also took part in a 10-minute group conversation test at the end of each semester. I examined relative proficiency scores and found that there was no pattern relating to the preferences of students for either longevity of the group or method of group formation. I also examined the level of participation in the conversation tests and again found no noticeable pattern that would explain student preferences. It seems from the data available that students' proficiency does not have an impact on the preferences, and students who were preferred alternative methods of group construction performed no differently on the end of semester conversation tests. It is possible that personality factors such as extraversion may have an impact, and this would be worth investigating in future studies.

### **Reasons for Group Selection**

The second research question is answered by qualitative analysis of the responses to the questionnaire given to students at the start of the second semester (see Appendix A), and also the interview data from the second semester where students were asked how they had chosen the members. Interview data and questionnaires were analyzed looking for patterns or themes in the data (Hatch, 2002).

With the questionnaire most students gave very short and simple responses to the question, "How did you decide the members of your group?" and some common themes emerged that had been written by the vast majority of students. "*Naka no ii tomodachi*" (friends that I get on well with) was by far

the most common response given. This indicates that most students simply chose their friends. The next most common response was "*chikaku ni ita tomodachi*," (friends who were close by), and a large number of students mentioned proximity to be a factor, although most students were standing with friends at the back of the room when the decision concerning groups was made. Other common responses were that students chose people who they usually spend time with outside of class, including those people that they have lunch with. As was hypothesized, students select members who are friends, and it does seem that proximity was also factor. Again this may be a result of the low motivation of students, who are more interested in enjoying the class than in working with members who may challenge them or help them to make greater achievements.

From a total of 72 students who responded to the questionnaire there were only two students that did not adopt the general approach of choosing friends, as exemplified by their respective comments "*sore hodo nakayokunai hito de kappatsuteki na hito ni shita*" (I chose people who were enthusiastic, but not my best friends), and "*itsu mo yoku iru hito denaku, fudan kara tama ni issho ni iru hito o erande, communication o totte yori nakayoku narou to kangaete guruupu o tsukurimashita*" (I chose people not who I am always with, but people who I sometimes spend time with, because I thought that I could get to know them better through communication class). Clearly these two students did not simply choose their best friends in the class, but the first student wanted to work with people who would be pro-active, possibly to improve his chances of achieving a high grade in the course. The second student saw the communication class as an opportunity to deepen existing friendships. Again I examined the data on proficiency, leadership, and participation, and there was nothing in any way outstanding about the two students that would have helped explain reasons for their different preferences.

Many students offered reasons as to why they had selected their closest friends to be in the same group for communication class. The most common reason is shown in the following quote which states that "*naka no ii*

*tomodachi da to hanashi yasui to omotta*” (I thought it would be easy to talk if it was my good friends). Many students claimed that friends would know what you were trying to say, and that conversation would be smooth and it would be easy to make conversation, a key factor in succeeding in the oral English course. Students in this context had little experience with English communication classes and were generally not confident with regards to speaking English, and therefore lowering anxiety was seen as beneficial.

During interviews at the end of the year I asked the eight students how they had chosen their group in the second semester, and responses supported the questionnaire data, with students in interview claiming that groups formed based on friendships and proximity. They also suggested that being with friends would enable them to relax and engage in conversation more smoothly.

The fact when given the choice students use friendship as the basis of judgments regarding group selection is not unexpected, particularly in a compulsory English class for non-English majors, where motivation is generally quite low. Experienced teachers are well aware of the fact that students form groups based on mutual feelings of friendship, and many teachers I have talked to believe that allowing students to form groups with friends facilitates smooth group work and means that no time is wasted as students grow accustomed to the members of their group. Indeed research has shown that groups where self-selection is allowed are more cohesive from the outset (Bacon et al., 1999), and cohesion has long been understood to lead to a higher level of group performance. While it seems that teachers are accurate in the perceptions of why students choose the other members of their group, the benefits cited by Bacon et al. (1999) may not necessarily apply to the groups in the current study, with the benefits of lowered anxiety possibly being somewhat offset by cohesion increasing social loafing.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate students' views on group work within the language classroom, specifically with regards to the way in which groups are formed, and the length of time that students want to stay in the same group. The study also tried to ascertain what factors governed students' self-selection into groups. The results show that students generally prefer self-selection into groups, but that this may not always be the most beneficial for language learning. Contextual and cultural factors are important, as it seems that these students felt an obligation to make an effort with people that they did not know well, but were prone to social loafing when with people that they knew well. This can be explained by the concept of "*amae*" (Doi, 1973) that influences interactions in this context, and means that randomized groups may have benefits.

Results suggested that students had a strong preference for changing groups during the semester, but not on a weekly basis. Changing weekly meant that students struggled to become comfortable and relaxed, but conversely remaining in the same group for an entire semester led to a lack of freshness in interactions. These results support the six-week cycle for groups suggested by Jacobs (2006), contradicting prior research showing "the longer the better" for groups in the classroom (Bacon et al., 1999).

In this context it seems that students do not form groups based on potential academic benefits but use existing friendship as their guide. This may be due to the relatively low motivation of students in this context, where the intention of most students is to simply pass the course. As mentioned above, some students did admit that working with close friends may not be as beneficial, but felt that it was more comfortable. However, due to the fact that friendship is based on shared beliefs and attitudes, it is likely that students will select others who are relatively similar to themselves in terms of overall motivation and academic ability.

Although I believe that the current study offers an interesting insight into student views on group work, there were a number of limitations. The first

limitation is that the research was not experimental in design. Although the students experienced different kinds of group formation and longevity, they all experienced it in the same order, and groupings were different for communication and writing courses. This means that preferences could be a result of the semester, or the course, and therefore results should be interpreted with caution. Subsequent studies should use a Latin squares design, varying the order in which students experience groupings, and also having students experience changing group mid-semester. It should also be noted that the data came from the researcher's own classes, and therefore, the threat of social desirability is strong. Students were given the questionnaire and interviewed by the teacher who was responsible for assigning their grade for the course, and many of the questions pertained directly to the way in which classes had been organized and taught. The results from this study are very much related to the specific context, with science majors of relatively limited English proficiency taking compulsory English classes in a foreign language setting.

Despite these limitations I feel that this study is an important first step in trying to understand how we can optimize the use of groups in the language classroom, and in considering the students views on group formation and duration. I hope that this study inspires others to begin to investigate the way in which group formation and duration can potentially impact the language proficiency gains made by students within their own contexts. Future studies should attempt to establish the influence of grouping on students' proficiency gains and in-class performance.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Open-ended Questionnaire

1学期は自分でグループを選べませんでした。2学期は自分でグループを決められました。どうやって自分のグループのメンバーを決めたのかを詳しく教えてください。

(English translation)

In the first semester you did not choose your own groups, but in the second semester you were free to choose your own group. Please explain in as much detail as possible how you selected the members for your group.

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Procedure

1. Introduce purpose-consent form. Confidential. No right or wrong answer.
2. Background information-self-introduction. English study to date. Group work to date. Do you like groups? Positive/negative experiences?
3. Describe the other members of group. Relationship outside of class/prior relationship.
4. Results of the leadership questionnaire. Check results and go through with student.
5. Why did you choose X as leader? How did they become leader? Were they a good/bad leader? Did they influence you? How?
6. Changes in self-efficacy. Why did it change?
7. Changes in collective-efficacy. Why did it change?
8. How was it to work with the same group for a term? Do you want to

change groups or remain in the same group? Do you want to choose members or random assignment?

9. Any questions/comments?

## APPENDIX C

### Transcription Key

(Based on Gumper, J. and Beren, N. 'Transcribing Conversational Exchanges' in J. Edwards and M. Lampert (eds.) 1993 Transcription and Coding Methods for Language Research. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.)

//	Final fall
/	Slight fall (indicating more could be said)
?	Final rise
,	Slight rise (more is expected)
..	Pause of less than 1 second
( )	Timed pause (time in seconds)
=	Overlap
{ [ ] }	Non-lexical phenomena which overlays the lexical stretch
[ ]	Non-lexical phenomena which interrupts the lexical stretch