

# **USING A FACILITATION TECHNIQUE TO FOSTER LEARNER AUTONOMY FOR COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH: BASED ON WHITEBOARD MEETING®**

Hiromasa Ohba

([hohba@juen.ac.jp](mailto:hohba@juen.ac.jp))

Joetsu University of Education, Japan

## **Abstract**

There are many problems that prevent Japanese university students from fostering their autonomy for active communication in English. There are also problems stopping them from being motivated to contribute more deeply to English problem-solving discussions and opinion exchanges. Some of their concerns are that they are not empowered to express their opinions in English, and they are extremely worried about making mistakes when they talk in English. To help students overcome these problems, I have conducted research based on Whiteboard Meeting® and have been exploring how it can be used to train students to think more creatively, create an atmosphere conducive to good communication, and contribute more deeply to English discussions. Whiteboard Meeting® is a facilitation technique and a framework for conducting meetings using whiteboards. As the facilitator writes the participants' opinions on the whiteboard, what is being discussed becomes clear, and the meeting will proceed effectively and efficiently. In English communication classes at university, this facilitation technique was introduced to first year non-English majors. This study examined whether it fostered their autonomy to deeply exchange ideas and opinions with each other in English discussion. The results will be discussed from the facilitative and autonomous points of view.

## **1 Introduction**

In Japan, there are many problems that prevent Japanese university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) due to their lack of initiative, and confidence when communicating in English. There are also problems stopping them from being motivated to contribute more deeply to English problem-solving discussions and opinion exchanges. Some of their concerns are that they are not empowered to express their opinions in English, and they are extremely worried about making mistakes when they talk in English. To help students overcome these problems, I have performed an investigation on the basis of Whiteboard Meeting® and have been exploring how it can be used to train students to think more creatively, create an atmosphere conducive to good communication, and contribute more deeply to English discussions.

This study considers whether or not the introduction of Whiteboard Meeting® facilitates Japanese EFL learners' autonomy for deeply exchanging ideas and opinions with each other in English discussion.

## **2 Background**

Recently, in second language (L2) learning, some studies explored interaction among learners from the different viewpoints on pattern (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). From the results, collaborative pairs developed higher levels of achievement than pairs in other interaction patterns (e.g., a dominant pair and a passive pair) irrespective of the learners' proficiency levels. Other studies have asserted the importance of the effects of cooperative conversation such as "collaborative dialogue" on L2 learning (Lapkin, Swain & Smith, 2002; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 2002).

Moreover, a great deal of peer feedback research on L2 writing has pointed out the benefits and flaws of peer feedback (e.g., Storch, 2002; Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Storch (2002) investigated how peer interaction worked on three different grammar-based writing tasks and distinguished four different patterns of interaction in terms of equality and mutuality: collaborative, dominant/dominant, dominant/passive, and expert/novice. Equality refers to the degree of control or authority over the task and the mutuality of the level of engagement between contributors. She found evidence of a transfer of knowledge in the data from both the collaborative pairs and expert/novice pairs. There were no expert students among the collaborative pairs, although they more often pooled resources concerning language choices. The result indicated the significance of working on tasks collaboratively. In this respect, Kim (2001) stated that the quality of relationships has a strong influence on the quality of results in his core theory of success. Efforts to get quick results become the "accelerator" to improve the quality of results over the short period. However, these actions can also serve as "brakes" by destroying the quality of relationships, leading to an ultimate decrease in the quality of results (Kim, 2001, p. 79)

However, pair work or group work is not necessarily cooperative without any treatment. Good communication and relationships among L2 learners do not appear naturally. Therefore, we need some skills, one of which is a facilitation skill. Whiteboard Meeting® is a facilitation technique and a meeting method using whiteboards. The person who leads the meeting is called the facilitator and participants are referred to as side workers. As the facilitator writes the participants' opinion on the whiteboard, what is being discussed becomes clear, and the meeting will proceed effectively and efficiently. It has been developed by Chon Seiko (Hitomachi Co., Ltd.) since 2003, and it is used in a wide variety of fields.

According to Chon (2010), as we have body strength, our mind has "some kind of strength" too. When we have warm "mental strength," we demonstrate our strengths and can achieve many things. We can actively try things we want to do, and accept help from others when we cannot overcome the obstacles. Even if we fail, we can keep progressing by learning from the experience (i.e., our failures). Warming the "mental strength" and making the most of the power we innately have is called "empowerment." Although "mental strength" warms up and cools down according to a variety of factors, the most influential thing is daily communication. Whiteboard Meeting® acknowledges people by writing their opinions. When the facilitator writes all the opinions without summarizing them and deepens the information to Level 4, through the nine open questions written in the "Whiteboard Meeting® question technique card," complaints and frustrations will turn into "valuable opinions." The "divergence - convergence - utilization" process will structure the discussion and enhance the thought organization and discussions, leading to concrete conclusions and action plans. Through honest and continuous

practices, you can create an empowered team where each member's skill will be well utilized.

In this way, we can foster active learning by deepening the dialogue and enhancing trial and error, and by establishing a good relationship of acknowledging each other. Although a large number of studies have been made on the effects of so-called cooperative learning (cf. Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994, 2002), little attention has been given to a facilitation technique, such as Whiteboard Meeting®, to improve the quality of relationships for active communication in the EFL classrooms.

### **3 Method**

The participants in this study were 83 university EFL students majoring in school education (not majoring in English-related academic fields, such as English literature, English linguistics and English education). All of them were first-year students in their first semester at a small national university in Japan. They ranged in age from 18 to 20. All participants shared the same L1 background, Japanese. They were considered to be lower-intermediate to intermediate proficiency learners of English (according to the scores of their National Center Examination for University).

They were engaged in the required course called “English Communication”, which they took once a week. They had 15 classes all through the semester, each of which was 90 minutes long. At the beginning of every lesson, students had some activities to train themselves as facilitators on the basis of Whiteboard Meeting® in order to have effective communication skills and good relationships. In this class, for the students to be autonomous when identifying social issues, and to show a willingness to discuss them actively in English, the following activities were assigned to them over five classes.

- (1) Listening to music in English and thinking about the meaning of the lyrics.
- (2) On the basis of their thoughts about the lyrics of the song, they made a speech in a group of four.
- (3) Finally, they exchanged their own opinions or problems they had raised, and discussed them.

They were always required to use facilitation skills they had acquired to do activities in a pair and a group. They repeated this set of activities as one unit three times. However, in the third unit, instead of listening to music in English, they read an English newspaper article on the lowering of the age of adulthood in Japan.

One of the most important techniques in Whiteboard Meeting® is the nine open questions and eight types of responses written in the “Whiteboard Meeting® question technique card.” Practicing repeatedly these open questions and responses (see Table 1), we learned to obtain good communication skills.

**Table 1. Nine Open Questions and Eight Types of Responses**

Nine open questions		Eight types of responses	
1.	What do you mean?	1.	Uh-huh.
2.	Tell me more.	2.	I see.
3.	For example?	3.	I get it.
4.	Tell me more details.	4.	Yes.
5.	More specific?	5.	Really.
6.	What kind of image?	6.	Right.
7.	Tell me the episode.	7.	And then.
8.	Anything is OK.	8.	I understand.
9.	Anything else?		

At the end of the course, a questionnaire was administered to them with 18 items on their reflections or attitude toward this course and the improvement of their writing and speaking abilities. I used the 5-point Likert scale (from “I completely think so.” to “I never think so.”).

#### 4 Results and discussion

In this study, I show the results of how the Japanese university EFL learners felt about their attitude toward autonomous and active participation in communication, and their abilities to speak and write in English. Table 2 indicates the results of their feelings about their English writing ability after the course. According to the results, though they still have a difficulty in writing speech manuscripts in English, their facilitation techniques based on Whiteboard Meeting® were effective enough to make the contents of their speech manuscripts rich.

**Table 2. The Results of their Feeling on English Writing Ability**

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	Through the classes, I learned to be able to write English better than before.	3.74	0.70
2	By thinking about the contents (scripts) of the speech using a mini-whiteboard, it became filled with many ideas.	4.30	0.68
3	By being asked by open questions (in Japanese), the contents (scripts) of the speech became filled with many ideas.	4.23	0.81

Table 3 shows the results of their feelings about their English-speaking ability after the course. It is said to be difficult for Japanese EFL learners to speak in English. In order to eliminate an awareness that they feel it is hard to speak English, we made good use of the facilitation techniques of Whiteboard Meeting® such as mini-whiteboards and open questions. The results show that although they still have nervousness and anxiety, they felt that their English-speaking ability improved.

**Table 3. The Results of their Feeling on English Speaking Ability**

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	With English activities using a mini-whiteboard, we had equal opportunities to talk in English, and my English ability improved.	4.21	0.68
2	In every class, pair communication in English at the beginning was very effective for speaking in English.	4.38	0.62
3	Through this course, I learned to be able to speak in English better than before.	4.09	0.73
4	By visualizing what I wanted to speak in English (keywords) on a mini-whiteboard, my nervousness and anxiety became less.	3.83	0.93
5	By visualizing what I wanted to speak in English (keywords) on a mini-whiteboard, it became easier to speak in English.	4.17	0.85
6	In English discussion, I learned to be able to make good use of nine open questions and eight types of responses.	3.96	0.78
7	By being asked using nine open questions (in English), I learned to be able to speak in English.	4.07	0.79

Table 4 gives the results of their feeling about their English writing ability. This result clearly shows that it is very important to have an atmosphere where failure and making mistakes are welcome. This means that we need to consider the atmosphere of the classroom. The classroom should be bright and peaceful for the learners to engage in the tasks in which they use English.

Moreover, using a mini-whiteboard is extremely fruitful for learners to autonomously and actively take part in the activities in English. We should notice that visualization definitely helps them perform their tasks, especially, when they speak and discuss in English among their group members.

**Table 4. The Results of their Feeling of acceptance and recognition**

No	Items	Mean	SD
1	The atmosphere where failure and mistakes are OK is very good.	4.69	0.52
2	By using a mini-whiteboard (both in Japanese and English), I was able to actively participate in the activities.	4.36	0.66
3	Through this English classes, I was able to nurture rich learning.	4.28	0.64
4	By using a mini-whiteboard (both in Japanese and English), I was able to enjoy the activities.	4.57	0.61
5	By using nine open question and eight types of responses (in English), I think I was able to have a deep understanding of English.	4.05	0.77
6	By using a mini-whiteboard (both in Japanese and English), the classroom atmosphere became bright and peaceful.	4.16	0.81
7	With what I spoke (both in Japanese and English) being written on a mini-whiteboard, I felt accepted and recognized.	3.86	0.88
8	By using a mini-whiteboard (in English), I was able to actively participate in the English activities.	4.33	0.61

## 5 Conclusion

This study has considered whether or not the introduction of Whiteboard Meeting® facilitated Japanese university EFL learners' autonomous and active participation for the deep exchanging of ideas and opinions with each other in English discussion. The results clearly show that the

activities based on Whiteboard Meeting®, one of the facilitation techniques, is useful for them to learn English in the classroom.

However, further analysis is required to examine the effects of using Whiteboard Meeting® in the EFL classroom on the improvement of their English speaking and writing abilities.

## References

- Chon, S. (2010). *Genki no deru kaigi (Meetings that empower people)*. Kaihou Publisher.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (1994). *The new circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom and school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Holubec, E. J. (2002). *Circles of learning: Cooperation in the classroom* (5th ed.). Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company
- Kim, D. H. (2001). *Organizing for learning: Strategies for knowledge creation and enduring change*. Pegasus Communications, Inc.
- Lapkin, S., Swain, M., & Smith, M. (2002). Reformulation and the learning of French pronominal verbs in a Canadian French immersion context. *Modern Language Journal*, 86, 485–507.
- Storch, N. (2002). Patterns of interaction in ESL pair work. *Language Learning*, 52, 119–158.
- Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14, 153-173
- Swain, M. (2000). The output hypothesis and beyond: Mediating acquisition through collaborative dialogue. In J. P. Lantolf. (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 97-114). Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, (2002). Talking it through: Two French immersion learners' response to reformulation. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 285-304.
- Watanabe, Y., & Swain, M. (2007). Effects of proficiency differences and patterns of pair interaction on second language learning: collaborative dialogue between adult ESL learners. *Language Teaching Research*, 11, 121–142.
- Wigglesworth, G., & Storch, N. (2009). Pair versus individual writing: Effects of fluency, complexity and accuracy. *Language Testing*, 26, 445–466.