


# Collaborative Learning in a Japanese Language Course: Student and Teacher Experiences

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## Abstract

This article describes ethnographic action research that explored experiences of the first author and her undergraduate students as they engaged in collaborative learning (CL) activities in a university Japanese language course. The purpose of the study was to generate new practical knowledge of CL for her, so that she might subsequently improve her teaching practice. A thematic analysis of the interview and descriptive data revealed that the incorporation of CL helped promote a comfortable environment and reduce the effects of the hierarchical authority of the instructor. While facing new challenges, the class also co-constructed its own knowledge about the reading content, language concepts, and cultural matters by working as a collaborative group. These findings are represented in the form of a performative text that invites readers to actively engage with the study's findings.

## Keywords

action research, collaborative learning, foreign/second language education, performative text, teaching and learning

This study explored the first author's experiences with her undergraduate students as they engaged in collaborative learning (CL; Peters & Armstrong, 1998) in an intermediate Japanese language course at a university in the United States. She had recently incorporated CL into her repertoire of lecture and discussion methods of teaching and learning. This change required students to learn how to learn differently in a traditional academic environment. For example, instead of relying on her expertise alone, the instructor asked students to engage in dialogue with other students and her, about various interpretations of readings, related language concepts, and aspects of Japanese culture. Their goal was to jointly construct new knowledge about these topics, knowledge that individual members of the class were unlikely to construct on their own. To understand how course participants experienced this change in pedagogy and its potential as a component of her future classroom teaching and learning strategies, the instructor conducted an ethnographic action research project. Following is a brief description of related literature and theory, the research method, findings, and discussions of results and implications of the study.

## CL

CL permeates the discourse of teaching and learning in higher education and is widely accepted as a legitimate pedagogy, especially by those who value peer-to-peer learning. For example, Dillenbourg (1999) defines CL as “a situation

in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together” (p. 1). Bruffee (1984, 1995, 1999, 2003), perhaps the best known proponent of CL in the higher education classroom, views CL as a kind of non-foundational learning process in which students work in groups or with members of knowledge communities that are larger and more complex than their own. The purpose of CL in this case is re-acculturation; that is, students change their membership from one learning culture to another through negotiating and modifying the language and values established from the original community and becoming fluent in the language of the new community. For example, a college-bound, high school graduate may have learned how to learn in a K-12 situation but may not have anticipated different ways of learning required in college, especially how knowledge is created. The aim of CL in this case would be for the student to transition successfully from his or her K-12 education into the broader academic community and the ways of knowing characteristic of the discipline he or she chooses to study.

According to Bruffee, students in higher education should be expected to examine critically their taken-for-granted

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beliefs based on earlier, foundational learning experiences. They should also inquire with others who may hold different assumptions, beliefs, and values, all in the interest of broadening and growing their own knowledge. For Bruffee, this process is best supported by “abnormal discourse” (Rorty, Williams, & Bromwich, 1980) that enables students to

establish knowledge or justify beliefs collaboratively by challenging each other’s biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collaboratively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities’ interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought. (Bruffee, 1984, p. 646)

Bruffee and other widely cited writers about CL (e.g., Barnes, 2004; Panitz, 1999; Rochelle & Teasley, 1995) are especially concerned that students come to value their own, collaboratively developed knowledge and rely less automatically on their assumptions about the authority of knowledge. This extends to discipline-specific knowledge, including knowledge held by an instructor considered a representative of his or her discipline. However, nearly all CL scholars position the instructor apart from their students in this regard and none identifies the instructor as a purposeful co-creator of knowledge alongside the students (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007). Nevertheless, as Dillenbourg (1999) points out, this positioning by the instructor can profoundly affect the nature of students’ interaction with them and other students. This brings into question how free students really are in terms of their ability to co-construct knowledge outside limits set by the instructor.

Peters and Armstrong (1998) proposed a typology of teaching and learning that positions the instructor’s relationship to students differently according to type of teaching and learning involved. Their typology consists of three types of teaching and learning. Type I (T-I) involves “teaching by transmission, learning by reception”; Type II (T-II) is called “teaching by transmission, learning by sharing”; and Type III (T-III) is “collaborative learning” (Peters & Armstrong, 1998, pp. 78-79).

Closely resembling Freire’s (1970) *banking* concept, T-I represents a traditional type of teaching and learning. The focus of T-I is on the subject matter that reflects philosophy and expertise of the teacher and members of his or her discipline. The teacher is the primary source of information, and the flow of information primarily goes from teacher to student. Thus, the primary mode of discourse is monologue and the focus is on individual student learning. Examples of T-I include lecture accompanied by demonstration, drill, and repetition (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

T-II involves more interaction among students who are seen as already having knowledge and experiences that they may use to help them develop new knowledge. As in T-I, the focus is on individual learning and the teacher still serves as

the primary source of information. Information flows from teacher to student and student to teacher, and student to student as they learn by sharing within small groups. The primary mode of discourse is discussion. Lecture followed by discussions exemplifies this type (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

In T-III, the teacher and students work together to co-construct new knowledge. The teacher becomes a member of the group, and communication flows from member to member, member to group as a whole, and group to member. Thus, individual members learn, and the group as a whole learns. This conception of CL is rooted in a social constructionist view of knowledge (Gergen, 1999). In this perspective, knowledge is generated within relationships from which humans derive their conceptions of what is real, rational, and good.

The primary mode of discourse in T-III is dialogue. Although they may have specific knowledge of the topic, the instructor is not presumed sole expert in the classroom. Students are expert in their own lives, including, in some cases, prior experience with the subject matter. Whereas in T-II the instructor facilitates works from the outside, in T-III he or she facilitates from the inside of the group. Group and individual members learn through critical reflection on past experience as well as what Schön (1983) calls reflection in action. Because of its interactive nature and inclusiveness, T-III appears strongly related to what Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) call a community of inquiry (cf. Skinner & Peters, 2014).

Even though each type of teaching and learning is distinctive in terms of its purpose and other dynamics, the typology should be viewed as a set or grouping of types, not as a hierarchy, continuum, or stages of teaching and learning. One type is no more or less important than the others at any given time in the classroom experience. An instructor could use all three types across multiple class sessions or one, two, or three types in one session. The goal is to achieve a balance in types, with each serving in harmony with the other two (Skinner & Peters, 2012, 2014).

Students and instructors already know how to act and what to expect of one another in T-I classrooms and, in some instances, T-II settings. However, studies show that T-III can be particularly difficult for students to learn how to negotiate successfully, especially in the beginning of a T-III experience (Armstrong, 1999; Burress, 2013; Creekmore, 2011; Crosse, 2001). It appears that students need time to adjust to different working relationships with each other and the instructor after a lifetime of mostly T-I and T-II classroom experiences (Burress, 2013). Instructors may also struggle with T-III in terms of their own goals and interests, such as the need to share responsibility for the learning process with students more so than in T-I and T-II learning (Cross, 1999).

According to a review of literature by Slavich and Zimbardo (2012), T-III helps students “restructure their own knowledge and understanding of concepts . . . recognize gaps

in their understanding, synthesize, communicate, and discuss ideas in ways that advance conceptual understanding, (and engage in) modeling of effective problem solving strategies” (p. 574). T-III extends these benefits to instructors, yet little is said in the literature about the instructor’s role as purposeful co-learner. However, it is clear that instructors have opportunities to reveal their ways of thinking and learning about the subject matter, including ways of knowing prevalent in their discipline. These opportunities allow instructors to model the processes of critical thinking, joint construction of knowledge, and dialogical communication, while facilitating students’ participation in the process.

Other studies report positive learning experiences and outcomes in classroom settings across several disciplines. For example, Merrill (2003) examined her own and her student’s experiences with CL in a community college information technology course. Her ethnographic analysis indicated that CL was helpful in creating a comfortable learning environment, building relationships between members, and developing an understanding of differing perspectives among participants. Similarly, Gray (2008) engaged her freshman composition class in CL alongside both T-I and T-II. A thematic analysis of her data revealed that engagement in CL helped her students gain confidence as writers, learn their writing strengths and weaknesses as well as those of others, and improve their writing skills. CL also provided increased opportunities for the creation of an open, comfortable, and safe classroom environment characterized by critical reflection and idea generation.

Finally, Li (2011) investigated how a group of her Chinese university students made meaning of their CL experiences as they engaged in an Intensive English reading course. The students were 19 to 20 years of age, and their English proficiency was intermediate to high. Based on a phenomenological analysis of students’ interviews and class reflections and her field notes, Li concluded that the incorporation of CL helped promote positive interpersonal relationships among students, increase their confidence in speaking English, improve their engagement in learning, and change their thinking about teacher and student roles. Li’s study is of particular interest because her course shares some features of the course that was the focus of the present study: for example, both courses involved learning of a second language, the introduction of an unfamiliar way of teaching and learning, and students who were at the intermediate level of language proficiency.

To our knowledge, no other research has investigated foreign language classroom settings, including Japanese, to examine student and teacher engagement in CL as defined in this article. Nevertheless, the aforementioned research and the first author’s graduate studies in CL gave impetus to her decision to incorporate CL in the intermediate Japanese language course she facilitated in 2009 and to study how she and the students experienced the process. Her research question was “How do students and instructor experience the

inclusion of CL (T-III) as one type of teaching in the intermediate Japanese language course?” The following is a discussion of how the study unfolded.

## Context of the Study

The intermediate Japanese language course consisted of 26 undergraduate students, ages 19 and 20. The majority were native English speakers and were traditional students who enrolled in the university immediately after high school. The group met for a 50-min session 4 times a week for one 14-week academic semester. The instructor decided to add CL to her usual T-I and T-II repertoire. The latter types included lectures or presentations used to introduce new vocabulary and grammar patterns, as well as discussions of these grammar patterns and their usage and conjugations (lecture and drill sessions). The instructor reasoned that CL would not be appropriate pedagogy for these aspects of the course as they typically involved right or wrong answers and that T-I and T-II were better suited. On the other hand, the instructor reasoned that CL would be particularly applicable to sessions in which assigned readings, such as biographic literature, were discussed. Knowing that CL is a process that engages students and instructor in joint construction of new knowledge, it seemed especially suited to readings involving controversial issues and cultural matters that generally did not call for right or wrong answers. In addition, as her students had already attained the intermediate level of language proficiency, the instructor believed that she and her students could go beyond the development of basic language skills to explore and construct knowledge through readings and dialogue about the Japanese language and culture.

In the reading sessions of the course, students and instructor sat in a large circle and engaged in dialogue (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999), in both Japanese and English, about assigned readings that they previously read in small groups. To engage in dialogue means to be sensitive to what is happening in the moment of discourse, develop shared meanings, and act in ways that nurture participants’ ways of being together, such as listening, reflecting, and valuing (Isaacs, 1999). Dialogue also involves mindfully attending to and cultivating knowledge that is being constructed by individual participants and jointly with others. Therefore, the instructor positioned herself as part of the group, and she and students assumed mutual responsibility for joint construction of new knowledge. The process of dialogue began with the instructor’s open-ended questions to students, such as “What stood out to you about this reading?” “Which part of the reading did you find particularly striking or resonating?” and “Which part did you continue to struggle to understand?” Students were encouraged to ask their own open-ended questions to other students and the instructor. The group then considered these questions in terms of all aspects of the reading materials, including language, cultural matters, and specific contents of the readings. The questions asked by students and the

instructor encouraged various responses and these responses led to additional questions, responses, and reflections. Instead of looking for predetermined answers or relying on the instructors' expertise, participants allowed discourse to emerge spontaneously from their moment-to-moment experiences and diverse voices. The instructor encouraged students to communicate in Japanese as much as possible to further develop their language skills.

## Method

The instructor decided to study her own and her students' experiences with CL in the course for three reasons: (a) the experience was new to all participants, including the instructor, and she assumed that the most direct route to understanding participants' experience was to seek their first-person reports of the experience; (b) the action research by Gray (2008), Li (2011), and Merrill (2003) yielded data that helped improve their respective teaching practices, and it seemed reasonable to assume that the instructor in the present instance would benefit from a similar undertaking; and (c) her findings could contribute to related literature.

To examine the students' and her own experiences in the CL reading sessions, the instructor selected a qualitative research method known as performance ethnography (Conquergood, 1998). The purpose of utilizing this method was not only to capture how students experienced CL but also to represent the findings in a style more accessible than conventional approaches that rely on summary displays of findings.

Data sources consisted of the instructor's field notes and individual phenomenological interviews with volunteer students. Following Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) suggestion, the field notes consisted of two kinds of notations: descriptive and reflective. The instructor's field notes were used to portray the participants and the research setting, describe particular events and activities during the CL reading sessions, as well as capture the instructor's thoughts and feelings about the method, related ethical dilemmas and conflicts (e.g., relational concerns), and her frame of mind (e.g., her own assumptions and beliefs) while conducting the study.

All students were invited to participate in the study, and seven of them volunteered. This number of participants fell within the acceptable range of participants ( $n = 6-12$ ) in phenomenological studies as established by Thomas and Pollio (2002). None of these participants had engaged in CL in classroom settings prior to this study. For the interview data, each of the seven volunteer study participants and instructor met for an approximately 1-hour, audio-recorded interview about each student's experience with the CL reading sessions. The interview followed a phenomenological procedure described by Thomas and Pollio (2002). It began with the question, "What was your experience with our CL reading sessions like?" This question was designed to make possible a broad range of descriptive responses while also

focusing the students on the topic of their CL experiences. This was followed by some probing questions that were derived from the participants' responses to the first question and subsequent responses. Probing questions or requests (e.g., "Please say more about that . . .") were designed to increase the richness of a participant's description of his or her experience. Instead of being in control of the direction of the interview, the instructor/interviewer approached the process from the "humble stance of perpetual learner" (Thomas, 2005, p. 73). Overall, the goal of the data collection was to obtain from the students a rich description of the CL experiences from their individual perspectives.

After the interviews were completed, the instructor transcribed interview recordings into a Word document for analysis. She then iteratively engaged with the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts for salient themes to the point of redundancy. Seeking to identify key themes of experience that surpassed the variations presented in individual accounts, she attended to broad patterns—first within each individual's data and then across the data set. In this process, *in vivo codes* (the actual words used by the informant) were utilized to demarcate shifts in meaning and describe areas of significance to the experience within the data, as well as *sociologically constructed codes* (this summary glosses over what the informant seemed to be describing) to identify recurring patterns and organize the data set (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Theme redundancy occurred after analysis of six transcripts; therefore, the seventh transcript was not analyzed. The instructor also read her field notes to gain additional insights into the contextual background of the themes. The second author assisted with the thematic analysis, providing an additional perspective and interpretation of the data.

## Findings

The back-and-forth interpretation and dialogue resulted in identification of four themes: (a) learning environment, (b) process and outcomes of learning, (c) responsibilities for teaching and learning, and (d) resistance to engaging in dialogue. Below is a brief description of each of these themes.

1. *Learning environment*: The physical surroundings, psychological or emotional conditions, and social or cultural influences affecting the teaching and learning of a course participant and the group.
2. *Process and outcomes of learning*: Actions taken (what and how) individually and collectively in an effort to achieve the goal of CL, that is, co-construction of new knowledge. What was gained, improved, constructed, and achieved as a result of the CL experience.
3. *Responsibilities for teaching and learning*: The authority and power one has to manage and direct the course of his or her learning. The relationship of



power between the group members, both the students and the teacher, as a classroom community.

4. *Resistance to engaging in dialogue*: Hesitation, reluctance, or refusal of a participant to engage in class dialogue either in English or Japanese.

To afford greater access to the meaning of these themes, they were organized and represented in the form of a performative text (Madison, 2008). In this research context, *performance* refers to “an interpretive event involving actors, purposes, scripts, stories, stages, and interactions” (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). The text was constructed based on the thematic structure of the findings as well as the manner that students and instructor engaged in a dialogical conversation in the Japanese classroom. The text was edited to make it more readable than would be the case if verbatim quotes taken from transcripts and notes were used instead. However, the original voices of the participant interviews and in the instructor’s field notes were maintained as much as possible. The purpose was to make the verbal exchanges as authentic as possible as the participants were imaginarily situated in a circle where they interwove their utterances into a dialogical conversation. Upon construction of the text, the relationship was ensured between the text and the findings by relating all parts of the text back to the themes to which they corresponded.

As the data were collected and analyzed, the authors practiced recursive reflexivity (Pillow, 2003). This proved especially helpful to the first author/instructor. Even though she attempted to suspend her assumptions and biases during the analysis, she also recognized that her relationship with the students might have affected various aspects of the study. For example, she ascribed grades in the course during the same time as the interviews. This is one instance in which the power differential between students and instructor had to be acknowledged. During the interviews, the instructor worked to minimize this effect by emphasizing to the participants her promise of no harm or penalties based on any aspect of their participation or lack of participation. Nevertheless, one cannot assume that this attempt completely freed the interviews from the power dynamic of the teacher–student relationship. Indeed, the study’s findings and the performative text may represent only a “partial truth” (Clifford, 1986) as it is situated in this context.

The following script, based on the performative text, is intended to help readers experience CL in a way similar to what the students and instructor experienced in the classroom. We invite readers to engage actively with the text in multiple ways, such as by reading it silently or, preferably, by reading it aloud. The reader of this article might also enlist others to play various characters’ parts while listening to the text. It may also help to imagine oneself playing the role of instructor, or as a director of the scenes presented in the text. The point is to find ways to engage in the experience represented by the performative text. Links to the participants’ thematic experiences will be discussed later in this article.

## A Performative Text

An introduction of the characters is provided below, followed by a script of their performance.

## The Characters

- Edward:** A Caucasian male in the senior year of a Language and World Business program. He studied in Japan as an exchange student during his senior year of high school. Edward enjoys poems and writes them for self-expression, such as his determination and independence.
- Grace:** An Asian American female in the junior year of a Studio Art program. She is also a member of the honors program. When leaving the classroom, Grace hopes to communicate better with her Japanese grandmother in Japanese.
- Kita:** A Caucasian female in the senior year of a Linguistics program. She is the founder and organizer of the Japanese movie night group. Kita’s effort to develop the language skill—by speaking with her friends and writing diary entries in Japanese—is remarkable.
- Mike:** A Caucasian male in the senior year of an Architecture program. He is also an honors student and is thrilled that his long-time dream, attending a graduate school in Tokyo, will finally become a reality in a few months.
- Rochelle:** A Caucasian female in the junior year of a Language and World Business program. She is a close friend of Kita, and both of them are active members of the course. Rochelle finds time in her busy schedule to practice yoga and watch Asian dramas.
- Walter:** A Caucasian male pursuing a double major in Theater and History. He attends pilot training to be certified to fly helicopters and looks forward to teaching English in China upon graduation.
- Meg:** The teacher and a native speaker of Japanese. As a doctoral student specializing in CL, she began practicing CL in her Japanese language courses and is learning to become a better facilitator of CL.

## Act

Edward, Kita, Mike, and Walter are gathered in a classroom, talking about a TV show that was aired the prior evening as they await the arrival of others. They are here to have a dialogue about their experiences with the CL methodology in their Japanese course. Soon Meg enters the room, briefly

greeting the students while also trying not to interrupt the ongoing conversation. After catching a breath, she glances at a watch on her wrist and asks the students to rearrange the tables and chairs to create a small circle conducive to dialogue. As they sit in a circle, Grace and Rochelle enter the room hastily and join the group. Meg then briefly describes the purpose of today's meeting and begins the dialogue by asking the group a question.<sup>1</sup>

1 **MEG:** So what are our CL reading sessions like for you? Is there anything that stands out?

2

3 **GRACE:** *(After a brief silence)* One thing that stands out to me is the learning environment. It's really comfortable as compared to the other classes I've taken in college.

5

6 **WALTER:** I think that's because engaging in CL helps us learn about each other and build our relationships.

8

9 **ROCHELLE:** Yeah, and that's not just between us, students, but also with you *(looking at Meg)*.

10

11 **MEG:** That's interesting because when I see us interact *(pointing to Grace and herself)* and you two interact *(pointing to Grace and Mike)*, I'm constantly reminded of what different types of relationships we have.

14

15 **ROCHELLE:** I think it's like an authority versus peer kind of thing. But then, I do think having you sit with us changes the dynamics. Obviously, you *(Meg)* are still the teacher, but it does involve you more with us and involve us more with you.

18

19 **MEG:** It does, doesn't it?

20

21 **GRACE:** Yes, it's nice to share knowledge with the teacher as well as the classmates in a way that we don't usually get to.

23

24 **MEG:** I'm glad to hear that.

25

26 **GRACE:** I think our safe feeling also comes from us knowing or assuming that we are not being graded when we are sitting in the circle.

28

29 **WALTER:** Say more, Grace?

30

31 **GRACE:** Yeah, in other Japanese classes I've taken, the teacher was usually at the front of the room, asking us questions in Japanese, and we had to answer in Japanese. In this kind of

33 situation, there is stress for us students because it is as if the teacher is firing questions off, and we feel like we have to get it right. In a sense, it's like being graded for each response. That's pretty scary *(laughter)*.

36

37 **WALTER:** *(Laughter)* I can definitely relate to that. It feels like we are being acknowledged, instead of graded, in the CL circle. I mean, I feel our opinions about something matter just as much as our ability to speak or use the language.

40

41 **EDWARD:** Besides the acknowledgements for our perspectives and contributions to the group process, I also think we are given more control over our learning processes.

43

44 **MEG:** Can you tell us more, Edward? I'm struck by what you just said.

45

46 **EDWARD:** Sure, for example, in my history class, the teacher assigns us groups and the topic of discussion, like the ideology of France, England, and Germany. Then, we talk about what we would have done as political leaders to prevent WWII or how we would have settled the treaty at the end of WWI. We are dictated or told what we have to talk about with whom.

50

51 **KITA:** Same thing for my English class. The teacher gives us a worksheet that exclusively uses a set of already made-up questions that we have to answer. If we don't answer them or get them "right," we lose points.

54

55 **EDWARD:** But then if you are doing what the teacher tells you to do or working toward a specific answer or conclusion that the teacher decides is "correct," it feels like you are limiting what you can take from your learning.

58

59 **GRACE:** Yeah, there definitely is something about having more leeway in learning . . . I mean in not having to come to a conclusion, or not having to stress out over certain details of reporting information back to the whole class after a small group activity.

62

63 **EDWARD:** To me, it's about emphasizing the appearance of the individual whereas worksheets or the kind of activities we do in my history class is more about the appearance of the group.

65

66 **MEG:** The appearance of the group, or the individual?

- 67  
68 **EDWARD:** Yeah, for example, in my history class,  
69 we work in a group of five to discuss  
70 answers to the questions the teacher prepares ahead  
71 of time. And there are two really vocal  
72 people who control the group, dictating the pace and  
73 reading our answers aloud to the class. I can  
74 voice my own opinions, but it's not gonna make any  
75 difference because they are not gonna write  
76 it down or express it to the class. So whereas what is  
77 presented might only be the spokesperson's  
78 or a portion of the group's perspective, it's still pre-  
79 sented as the group's perspective. That's the  
80 appearance of the group.  
81  
82 **GRACE:** How about our CL sessions?  
83  
84 **EDWARD:** I think CL allows everyone's opinion  
85 that wants to be represented to be represented.  
86 And I think this makes a big difference in what we  
87 say and how much thinking we put into  
88 learning.  
89  
90 **ROCHELLE:** I think so, too, definitely. When  
91 doing CL, we are asking questions like "What is  
92 this piece trying to say and how is it trying to say it?"  
93 "How do we relate to the piece?" and  
94 "Where are our thoughts?" These kinds of general  
95 questions generally lead toward more specific,  
96 different opinions and conclusions. So CL actually  
97 helps generate more thoughts and different  
98 kinds of learning than those straightforward work-  
99 sheet ones.
- 100 **MIKE:** I agree, Rochelle. I always thought it was  
101 really interesting how we start with a  
102 particular topic, say the reading about *yakudoshi*  
103 [i.e., a critical or unlucky year], and then move  
104 to culture as a whole. From one aspect of culture, we  
105 get into things like psychology and gender,  
106 so deep of a conversation on more various aspects of  
107 the cursed year. And the same thing for the  
108 *Yoko Ono* reading. We start talking about one wom-  
109 an's life and her experience artistically and  
110 personally, and then we move to poetry and exhibi-  
111 tion of personal art as a whole.
- 112 **EDWARD:** It's really interesting how a group of  
113 people can sit together and go there. It actually  
114 reminds me of when I played in band in high school  
115 and middle school. You sit down, and one  
116 person would be playing a song, and you'd have  
117 another person join in, and there would be this  
118 group. And that's where music gets developed.
- 119 **MEG:** I like your band metaphor, Edward. I  
120 think it describes a CL experience well, you  
121 know,  
122 like us co-authoring our journey of learning.
- 123 **ROCHELLE:** Yes, CL is not about destination, but  
124 journey. It's the process that's important.
- 125 **KITA:** And it's all of us, not the teacher alone, who  
126 coordinate the course of our journey, our  
127 learning.
- 128 **WALTER:** Tell us more, Kita.
- 129 **KITA:** For example, instead of using worksheets,  
130 we focus on relating our own experiences to  
131 the reading materials. And our conversation devel-  
132 ops naturally based on what matters to us.
- 133 **WALTER:** Yeah, and what's important to us might  
134 not occur to you (*Meg*) because you are a  
135 native speaker of Japanese. What might seem really  
136 elementary and obvious to you, we might  
137 not have any idea about why you would say some-  
138 thing in a certain way.
- 139 **GRACE:** So all of us get to be teachers as well as  
140 learners, yes? I think this way of teaching and  
141 learning allows us to really feel that everybody has  
142 something valuable to contribute to the class.
- 143 **ROCHELLE:** Yeah, I remember Kita's linguistics  
144 background helped us understand the  
145 phonetic reasoning behind *yakudoshi* in one class  
146 session. Does anyone remember? We were  
147 talking about *yakudoshi*, and she was sharing how  
148 the sounds contributed to the number or age  
149 being lucky or unlucky.
- 150 **MIKE:** I remember. In the debriefing of that ses-  
151 sion, I said that I felt different viewpoints and  
152 knowledge other members had brought shed new  
153 light on my experiences and perspectives.
- 154 **EDWARD:** I'd add that it's not just about learning  
155 *from* other members, but learning *with* them.  
156 Even though I like poetry, if it wasn't for other  
157 members, I wouldn't have gone back to re-read  
158 and develop appreciation for it. I think the group  
159 helps not only bring out other ideas that you  
160 haven't thought about before but also push you to  
161 think more about what you read.
- 162 **MIKE:** Right, but at the same time, it feels like I  
163 still haven't gotten used to the level of control

134 we are given in our CL sessions. I do enjoy it, but I  
135 know I'm expecting to hear more from you  
136 (*Meg*).

137 **KITA:** Yeah, I agree with you, Mike. Sometimes  
138 when we have 10 seconds of silence, we all  
139 seem to be looking at you (*Meg*) and wondering  
140 why you aren't telling us the answer, why aren't  
141 you telling us what the correct way of thinking  
142 about this is.

143 **MEG:** I'm intrigued by what you just said, Kita. I  
144 just want us to create our own "music" for  
145 ourselves. What do you think?

146 **KITA:** I can understand that in my head, but I know  
147 I'm still questioning. It's just nice to get, at  
148 least after we bring out our opinions on the table, an  
149 expert or native cultural perspective because  
150 that helps a lot in understanding, especially when  
151 we are speculating.

152 **MEG:** Well, you know, I'm still learning just like  
153 you. Like, when we were talking about *Yoko*  
154 *Ono*, Walter was very knowledgeable about the hip-  
155 pie movement, and that really helped me to  
156 make sense of Yoko's life experiences in con-  
157 text. So I don't see myself as an expert on the  
158 topic  
159 or think I know everything about it just because I  
160 am a teacher or a native speaker of Japanese.  
161 Does that make sense?

162 **MIKE:** Yeah, it does, and maybe it's just some-  
163 thing that's been ingrained in me as I've  
164 progressed through the educational systems.

165 **EDWARD:** I think so, too, Mike. I think your  
166 expectations for Meg or the silence Kita  
167 mentioned comes from the fact that we are used to  
168 being controlled in classroom settings.  
169 Almost everyone in this country probably grew up  
170 with some sort of structured group system.

171 **MEG:** I understand the unfamiliarity, discomfort,  
172 or frustrations you might be experiencing with  
173 the process of CL. And in a way, I feel very much  
174 the same. I, too, am more used to working on  
175 worksheets or having the teacher lecture me. So  
176 you have seen me unintentionally slipping out of  
177 my co-learner role and answering your questions  
178 without having us think together.

179 **GRACE:** I think we will get used to this new way  
180 of teaching and learning as we continue to go

181 on together. It takes time and effort to become com-  
182 fortably with something different from what  
183 we are used to or what's been ingrained in us for so  
184 long, you know?

185 **WALTER:** I agree, and I would say, even within an  
186 unfamiliar environment, I have learned a lot  
187 from doing CL—about the reading content, lan-  
188 guage concepts, and cultural matters.

189 **ROCHELLE:** Yeah, I really think CL helps more  
190 deeply penetrate the piece and nail some of  
191 the Japanese language concepts.

192 **MEG:** Can you (*Rochelle*) or anyone else remem-  
193 ber the specific moments when you had that  
194 experience?

195 **EDWARD:** If you noticed, me and Joey were going  
196 back and flipping through, trying to find out  
197 about vocabulary or *kanji* [i.e., Chinese characters]  
198 that we had forgotten. Even though it's not  
199 like sitting there writing in a workbook for an hour  
200 over and over, we remember it well from  
talking about it as a part of a reading.

**GRACE:** Well, I tend to think we talk more about  
cultural things than just language concepts in  
our CL sessions. But talking about culture actually  
helps develop our general understandings of  
the language because it gives us the context of lan-  
guage development and usage.

**ROCHELLE:** Right, it's like, instead of just say-  
ing, "'*Sumimasen*' and '*gomen*' mean 'sorry' in  
English," you understand the mechanics of the dif-  
ferent levels of formality behind these two  
words, and you can use them appropriately in  
communication.

**EDWARD:** Yeah, but then we are not just adding  
information into a pot. We are also integrating  
our knowledge and experiences and creating some-  
thing that's entirely new and amazing. This is  
what I was trying to describe earlier with the meta-  
phor of my band experience.

**GRACE:** But not every CL session felt the same to  
me. There seem to be times when I learned,  
or took from my CL experience, more or less. Can  
anyone relate to that?

**ROCHELLE:** I do. I think that in some sessions  
our conversation is more engaging than in  
other sessions.



- 201  
202 **KITA:** Yeah, there were times when I wished more  
of us were into it.
- 203  
204 **MEG:** Right, you see, that's something I've been  
pondering over. But what do you  
205 think makes such a difference in our engagement?  
206
- 207 **MIKE:** Well, for me, if something stopped me  
from sharing my perspective or contributing to  
208 the group process as much as I wished, it was  
because of the narrow-mindedness and  
209 disrespectful behaviors of some group members.  
Sometimes they were talking over one another,  
210 or saying things like, "Oh, that's weird," to some  
aspects of Japanese culture where they were  
211 only different from what they were accustomed to.  
212
- 213 **GRACE:** Perhaps we need to be more mindful of  
what we say and how we say it.
- 214  
215 **MIKE:** Yeah, if something like this happens again  
in the future, it needs to be addressed, I think.
- 216  
217 **MEG:** Yes, let's do so. It's important we constantly  
remind ourselves of developing and  
218 maintaining safe, open space where we are all  
respected and respectful.
- 219  
220 **EDWARD:** Well, my experience is a little bit dif-  
ferent from Mike's. I don't really want to talk  
221 because I don't want to negatively influence other  
members' reading experiences and the group  
222 process.  
223
- 224 **WALTER:** Huh, negatively influence? How so?  
225
- 226 **EDWARD:** Like today, I wanted to participate  
more, but I didn't feel like I should because other  
227 people had finished the reading and had more  
knowledge than I did. I didn't wanna ruin their  
228 experience and what they took from the reading.  
Besides that, I don't wanna get in a conflict.
- 229  
230 **KITA:** But everyone knows you have such great  
insights, Edward. So if you—and all of us—  
231 had talked as much as we could in either English or  
Japanese, that probably would have helped  
232 us a lot more with our Japanese.  
233
- 234 **ROCHELLE:** I agree, Kita. At the same time, I  
also think that we need to be more  
235 understanding and patient because we all have dif-  
ferent personalities, values, and experiences.  
236
- 237 **GRACE:** Yeah, and I guess we are taking the class  
for different reasons. So people who are  
238 trying to fulfill their foreign language requirements  
are more likely to be mildly interested in  
239 participating because they just wanna get through  
the class. Well, I guess that's my assumption,  
240 but . . .  
241
- 242 **MIKE:** And there are also people who are moti-  
vated but shy. They don't want the spotlight  
243 shining on them.  
244
- 245 **KITA:** *(Smiling)* That's me. I know I have lots of  
stage fright. As much as I would love to, I  
246 can't speak Japanese. You *(Meg)* know the lan-  
guage, so you know when I make mistakes.  
247
- 248 **WALTER:** I wonder what we can do about that.  
249
- 250 **KITA:** What do you think about using small  
groups, instead of one large one? When we are in  
251 small groups, maybe we have less pressure about  
making mistakes or looking stupid in front of  
252 the whole class. And I think being in a small group  
can force everyone to engage; they have  
253 more pressure to stay focused and contribute.  
254
- 255 **ROCHELLE:** I think working in small groups has  
some advantages, but I really do feel having  
256 you *(Meg)* with all of us throughout the process—  
like thinking and reflecting together—makes  
257 CL different from other methods of teaching and  
learning. What do you think, Meg?  
258
- 259 **MEG:** Yeah, you know, once we break into groups,  
I'm afraid I will be positioned outside of the  
260 group, and this way, I will be participating mostly  
as teacher or facilitator rather than co-learner.  
261 And that's not what we want.  
262
- 263 **EDWARD:** I'm also afraid this change might  
emphasize the appearance of the group over the  
264 individual.  
265
- 266 **WALTER:** What are your thoughts, Kita?  
267
- 268 **KITA:** Yeah . . . I see your points. I wonder if there  
are any other ways to increase our  
269 participation level besides using small groups,  
though.  
270
- 271 **GRACE:** Maybe a writing assignment about a  
reading beforehand can help? This may push  
272 more people a little more to read, think, and have  
something to share with the group in class.

273  
 274 **ROCHELLE:** And maybe have us write in  
 275 Japanese as much as possible, while also  
 276 communicating in English as well for the things  
 277 that we don't know how to write in Japanese yet.  
 278 This may allow us to practice using Japanese so this  
 279 doesn't have to be accomplished only in  
 280 conversations.

281 **GRACE:** Yeah. I think many of us are not well  
 282 versed in Japanese with both language and  
 283 culture. So if we had some time to do research on  
 284 the topic and think about it outside the class, I  
 285 think this could help increase our participation and  
 286 expand our conversations.

287 **MIKE:** Besides the writing assignment, it may also  
 288 be important to reexamine our choice of  
 289 reading.

290 **ROCHELLE:** I agree, Mike. I remember when we  
 291 first started out. I think our first reading was  
 292 *Doraemon*, and that was just telling us about some-  
 293 thing that we maybe didn't know about, and  
 294 that was about *Doraemon*, his TV show and manga,  
 295 and how it started out. And after that, we did  
 296 the *Yoko Ono* piece. That was really nice because it  
 297 brought together a lot of different things, like  
 298 abstract concepts that are common in poetry and  
 299 literature. And how controversial all the things  
 300 Yoko did were at that time, not to mention the con-  
 301 text of that time, which was the Vietnam war  
 302 and the hippie movement.

303 **EDWARD:** Yeah, I think the reading needs to be  
 304 interpretive as well as informative. It was only  
 305 a few lines, but I really liked the poem in Yoko  
 306 Ono's, the *Cloud* piece. I stopped and read this  
 307 poem just because it spawned millions of other  
 308 ideas. I got a different meaning out of it every  
 309 time I read it.

310 **MEG:** Right, and I, too, have thought about the  
 311 relationship between the reading content and our  
 312 engagement levels. And I agree that some changes  
 313 need to be made about the choice of our  
 314 readings as they might be more or less suitable for  
 315 class dialogue.

316 **WALTER:** It's great to know there are many things  
 317 we can do to improve our CL experiences,  
 318 isn't it?

319 **MEG:** Yes, Walter. And thank you for your positive  
 320 outlook. I also would like to thank you all

321 for participating and sharing today. I really enjoyed  
 322 hearing, talking about, and learning from our  
 323 experiences. We addressed many important points,  
 324 and these will be helpful in improving the  
 325 situations in our CL sessions. Our next CL reading  
 326 session is scheduled for a week from now. So  
 327 let's practice again then with some changes and see  
 328 what happens!

## Discussion

The authors return to the themes and discuss them from the students' perspective based on their interview data and from the instructor's perspective based on her field notes and further reflections. Examples of themes are found in links to numbered pages in the performance text.

### Learning Environment

*Students' perspective.* The learning environment stood out as an aspect of students' experience with CL (e.g., 3-17). Engaging in CL helped them create a sense of comfort and safety that in turn enabled them to learn about one another and build relationships over time. This finding corresponds to that of Merrill (2003), Gray (2008), and Li (2011), all of whom reported that the creation of an open, comfortable, and safe classroom environment and the promotion of positive relationships among their study participants contributed to meaning making by students and instructor. In this study, the comfortable environment, especially the positive reinforcements students received from one another and the instructor while learning to engage in CL, stood in sharp comparison with their former T-I and T-II classroom experiences, which tended to be competitive and focused on getting correct answers and grades.

*Instructor's perspective.* Closely related to creation of a comfortable learning environment was the instructor's attempt to reduce the effect of power differences that often exist between teacher and students in a classroom setting (e.g., 15-39). The instructor noted that with time, students became more relaxed about these differences. This finding is consistent with Peters and Armstrong's (1998) concept of CL and the role that dialogue plays in reducing the effects of hierarchical authority associated with T-I and T-II teaching and learning. This finding is also in line with Burress' (2013) discovery of the critical role that time plays in the formation of a strong group dynamic in the CL classroom.

### Process and Outcomes of Learning

*Students' perspective.* A few student participants described their experiences with the CL process (e.g., 88-93) by employing metaphors, such as likening dialogue to playing music in a band (e.g., 95-98). On the whole, these metaphors

represented the students' experience with the contributions of other group members as well as the emphasis the instructor placed on the learning process, for example, valuing of the "yet-to-be-created (knowledge)" (Peters & Gray, 2007), instead of seeking a specific, previously known answer to a question. As a result, instructor and students jointly constructed their own new knowledge about the reading content, language concepts, and cultural matters (e.g., 170-190). For example, as they engaged in dialogue and interwove their existing knowledge, they learned that phonetic reasoning behind *yakudoshi* may account for *honyaku* (great calamity) at the ages of 42 for men and 33 for women. These numbers are phonetically unlucky as 42 can be pronounced *shi-ni*, which is homophonous with the words "to die" or "death," and 33, when pronounced as *sanzan*, means "terrible" or "disastrous." This knowledge was not a simple reproduction of what participants knew in advance from the text or other related resources; instead, it was jointly constructed as they dialogued, taught, and learned with one another in the comfortable and safe environment that they had developed together. Dialoging on these issues further contributed to improved understanding of the content of the readings as it reinforced participants' need to review the materials and consider the issues multiple times, both as individuals and with the group as a whole (e.g., 129-131). In short, participants' experience with the CL process and the way they worked together enabled them to think and learn not only individually but also as a group.

**Teacher's perspective.** Working as a collaborative group, the participants engaged with one another as co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge by utilizing and interweaving their experiences, skills, and relationships and by assuming mutual responsibility for their constructive process (e.g., 100-128; 192-194). Excerpts from the instructor's reflective field notes illustrated the differences in this process and her previous experience with T-I and T-II.

I was sometimes astonished to see and experience how our engagement in dialogue could lead us to talking about the readings, language, and culture in a way that I did not expect or predict. We often created a new path of our teaching and learning, bringing in our own knowledge and skills and weaving them together into shared knowledge that was broad and nuanced. For example, the incorporation of CL helped me gain greater understanding about the readings, such as Yoko Ono's poem about counting and naming clouds, in a way that I could not have achieved alone . . . Each of the students and I brought in our own knowledge, experience, and talent, as well as our unique ways of approaching and understanding the poem and Yoko's life.

These same notes indicated that the instructor's experience helped her to learn more about the students. She came to realize that until she engaged in dialogue with her students that she did not know who they were—what they were

interested in, what they already knew, and how thoughtful they were. There were times when she felt that she learned more about the students in one session than during an entire semester the previous year when she taught the same group without engaging with them in CL.

### *Responsibilities for Teaching and Learning*

**Students' perspective.** Although the incorporation of CL produced positive outcomes, students faced some challenges associated with CL. They had to learn how to deal with responsibilities of helping to create and maintain conditions that support dialogue and co-construction of knowledge in the classroom, such as by taking an active role in the process (e.g., 41-80; see McNamee & Gergen, 1999). However, unlike the shift that occurred for Li's (2011) study participants in terms of their understanding of students' responsibilities, some students in the current study continued to expect to be taught, or hear correct answers, or learn "expert or native cultural perspectives" from the instructor only, and not from their classmates (e.g., 133-159).

**Teacher's perspective.** Similarly, the instructor often struggled to facilitate the group in a way that would engage all participants, students, and instructor, in dialogue. She had difficulty letting go of her control as a teacher and occasionally slipped out of her co-learner role and answered the questions that other members raised without searching with them for a newly constructed answer (e.g., 161-164). In addition, there were times when the teacher and students merely exchanged their stories and experiences and neglected to work together to generate new knowledge. This became a challenge for the instructor—a surprise, given her training in CL—and a new sense of respect for the complexities of T-III teaching and learning.

### *Resistance to Engaging in Dialogue*

**Students' perspective.** As Li (2011) reported, the level of students' overall engagement increased with the incorporation of CL; however, in this study, some students continued to resist engaging in dialogue in English as well as in Japanese (e.g., 202-246). According to the students, their resistance stemmed from various sources, such as a fear of making mistakes and appearing stupid, a desire to avoid conflicts, and a concern with others' perceived disrespectful behaviors. To increase the level of all students' engagement in the process, students and the instructor continuously reminded themselves of the importance of developing and maintaining a dialogical space (Isaacs, 1999; Shotter, 2008) where all members are respected and respectful (e.g., 217-218).

**Teacher's perspective.** Students' resistance to playing new roles and increasing their engagement in learning was a concern not only to students but also to the instructor. Even

when she called on students to speak, they often expressed that they did not have anything to say or did not know what to say in order to proceed. In response, the instructor engaged in frequent conversations with the students about how to encourage and help students to voluntarily and actively participate in the process (e.g., 248-301). However, students were more actively engaged at some times and less active at other times. This uneven engagement seemed to depend on the strength of appeal that particular readings had to students. Readings were more or less relevant to students' experiences, and some readings naturally elicited multiple interpretations or perhaps addressed more controversial and thus interesting issues than did others. Overall, the more relevant, controversial, and varied the readings, the more likely students were to engage in dialogue (e.g., 283-301).

## Conclusion

One of the most widely discussed topics in contemporary higher education is how to get students more engaged in teaching and learning activities (Kahu, 2013). This usually means that instructors prefer students to be active learners, instead of passive learners. Active learning can be seen in the use of problem-based learning experiences, various other forms of experiential learning, and even question and answer episodes in the classroom. In the present study, it is clear that students and instructor were actively engaged through their discussion and dialogue about readings, even though the extent of their engagement seemed to vary with their interest in particular readings. Engagement in this case means thinking together (Isaacs, 1999), asking and responding to questions posed by peers and instructor, openly reflecting on the content of the readings as well as on reading assignments and engaging in dialogue about the readings. The very act of co-constructing new knowledge implies engagement, as working jointly to make meaning is in itself a form of engagement. This feature of T-III may be an obvious but overlooked area of student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and student-to-group engagement in higher education classrooms, as most literature on the subject has focused on T-I and T-II teaching and learning environments.

Although students in the present study were ages 19 and 20, some adult education scholars would identify them as adult learners about which much theorizing has been done (e.g., Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Cross, 1999; Knowles, 1980; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Mezirow, 1991; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Knowles' work, in particular, set the stage for subsequent discourse about the need for instructors to involve students as active participants in the teaching and learning process. It is easy to see how Knowles' principles are applicable to T-II experiences. In fact, the latter in its lecture-discussion form may be the sine-qua-non of a Knowles teaching and learning experience. However, the experience that students get in a T-III teaching and learning setting takes the notion of active adult learning a step higher,

as students and instructor labor together to construct new knowledge.

Even though their concept of CL seems bounded by what students can learn among themselves with input from the outside by an instructor, Bruffee and others who position the instructor on the outside nevertheless cite the potential of student-to-student engagement and active learning as catalysts for critical thinking. Peters and Armstrong's extension of this idea to include the instructor's direct involvement as co-learner places the whole of classroom participants in a position to think critically together about course content and process, moment-to-moment, during their classroom engagement. This attention to process and content has to do with metacognition, or thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979; Hennessey, 1999; Kaplan, Silver, LaVaque-Manty, & Meizlish, 2013; Martinez, 2006), as much as it is to do with what they are thinking about. The students and instructor in this study were constantly thinking as critically about the topic of their discourse as they were about how they were engaging in the discourse. The instructor also reflected critically on her own facilitating moves and on students' responses to her moves.

So, how did the instructor and her students experience the inclusion of CL (T-III) as one type of teaching among others in the intermediate Japanese language course? Overall, their CL experience contributed to their individual and joint understanding of readings related to the Japanese language. However, CL was in many ways different, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable for students and instructor alike. This experience may have been due to the new way of learning that the particular process of CL, or T-III, presented for study participants. Students and instructors in general tend to take for granted how to act and what to expect of one another in T-I and T-II settings, and this was the case for participants in this study, at least in the beginning of their course. When it comes to T-III, students and instructors may be faced with learning a whole new way of engaging in teaching and learning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998; Skinner & Peters, 2012, 2014). For example, engaging in CL necessitates that students and instructor relate in multiple and complex ways; for example, as teacher, facilitator, co-learners, and co-constructors of knowledge. In this study, achieving a balance in these multiple ways of relating was a challenge. In spite of the instructor's attempts to demonstrate the value of all three types of teaching and learning, some student participants continued to expect to be taught in a more conventional manner and resisted aspects of T-III, especially participating in dialogue with the teacher and their peers. This resistance was exacerbated when the instructor also struggled to let go of her T-I and T-II pedagogies, in spite of having extensive training in CL.

Finally, this research was undertaken in part because no other studies of CL in the Japanese language classroom exist. Based on this study, the authors feel comfortable in saying that CL (T-III) holds promise as a third approach to teaching



and learning. This adds to the usual emphasis on practical communication and development of language skills (T-I and T-II) in a Japanese language course. The study also contributes to the limited research on Peters and Armstrong's typology of teaching and learning by virtue of its unique application in a Japanese language classroom. By and large, this study is consistent with other, differently situated studies of CL, thus adding to the level of support for the typology. However, because this study reports on only one course in Japanese on one university campus, the results may or may not be the same in other Japanese language classrooms or for other modern foreign languages. The authors suggest that similar research be undertaken in other modern foreign language settings, so that researchers may better understand what can be achieved by utilizing multiple types of teaching and learning in this area of undergraduate education.

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### Note

1. Lines in the script are enumerated and keyed to the discussion that follows.

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