

'Ganbarism', an art in the craft of collaborative learning

Chantal Hemmi looks at the importance of the 'ganbaru' spirit in Japanese learners.

Having taught students from the ages of six to seventy in EFL classes in Japan, I falter in admiration for the 'ganbaru' spirit, often perceived by the learners as one of the important attributions to success in language learning. 'Ganbaru' means 'to try hard', and endure the hardships. Making an effort despite the pain it may involve seems to be an in-built aesthetic need fostered at home and in the education system at a very early age in Japan. Incidentally, 'Ganbarism' is a colloquialism deriving from the verb 'ganbaru', the suffix, '-ism' borrowed from the English language.

Recent developments in a globalized EFL market have brought to light a growing complexity in the multiple perceptions of notions linked with successful learning in that each learner brings into the classroom culturally different beliefs about learning from the past. Thus, as English language educators, we are required to be open to varied cultural concepts and strategies of learning, even if it goes against commonly held western notions of successful achievement ingrained in us through our education. Here I consider the importance of the acknowledgment of different and unique cultural concepts in the learners' mind, taking an interpretation of 'ganbarism' as an example.

Previous experience of group-work

I recently taught a group of first- and second-year students at Sophia University in Tokyo majoring in journalism, engineering and science. My aim was to introduce and practise the language of discussion at intermediate level through methods that required the students to work collaboratively in groups. What I found intriguing was the fact that learning a language through group-work was fairly new to them. The majority of the students mentioned that group-work was conducted mostly at primary school, and although at junior high school, ten out of forty-three participants had experienced group-work, at high school, group-work was rarely used. The reason for this may be that, at high school, the students were required to use their 'ganbaru' spirit in their individual work for their preparation to apply for a university. Thus group-work may not have been frequently chosen as a mode of learning at this stage.

Co-construction of knowledge

At the end of the academic year, I asked the students to write a paragraph on their perceptions of what they thought they had learnt through group-work. Forty out of forty-three students on the course replied and the most frequently cited comment was, 'I was able to widen my views by listening to others'. This comment made by twenty-seven students showed that co-construction of knowledge through interaction was the most commonly perceived outcome of

working in groups. Cross-pollination of ideas across the science, journalism and engineering students was abundant in their interaction, and it appeared that once they were working in groups of six, rather than the whole class, they were less inhibited about showing what they did or did not know.

Product and process

'I learnt that it was difficult to communicate in English' and 'I made a lot of friends' were cited by four students, followed by 'I was able to learn new vocabulary', 'I learnt that it is difficult to speak in English on the spot' and 'I learnt how to co-operate and work towards our goal to do the final debate', each of these comments being cited three times. Thus the students' perceived development included linguistic factors such as vocabulary learning and affective factors such as making friends and co-operation. Other comments made were 'I learnt how to interrupt', 'I was able to learn the words to link my ideas together' and 'I was able to learn about the flow of the debate'. These comments can be interpreted as aspects of linguistic development perceived by the students. Students' notions of learning through group-work included the product, the linguistic achievement as well as the process of co-operation and co-construction of knowledge.

'I learnt that it was difficult to communicate in English.'

Admitting that something was 'difficult' can be interpreted as a virtue in Japanese culture in that the learners are showing modesty in the process of learning. As an answer to the question 'What did you learn?', 'I learnt that it was difficult to communicate in English' may not sound like a logical answer from the view of western thinking. However, by admitting that something is difficult, the learners may be implying that they must apply their 'ganbaru spirit' in their future work. Therefore, their future success is attributed to effort, a controllable internal factor (Weiner 1986) in the learning process.

The question of responsibility

Finally, I asked the students to write a paragraph on what they have learnt/achieved better if they were working independently and not in groups. Forty students took part in this exercise. Surprisingly, fourteen out of forty respondents said 'I would have taken more responsibility over my work'. This most frequently cited comment was followed by 'I would have learnt more words as I would have checked them on my own,' cited by eleven students. I found this data that



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emerged to be rather alarming as I started to wonder about the learners' notion of responsibility in group-work. So I asked the students to write another paragraph about the difference between responsibility in group-work and in individual work.

Contrary to my anticipation that the students did not place importance on responsibility in group-work, the students had positive and precise notions of the nature of

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responsibility in groups as 'role'. One student said 'I think when you work on your own, it's completely up to you whether you succeed or not. However, when we work in groups, we are given a role to play and it's your responsibility to fulfil that role. If you don't, you will give a lot of trouble to the others who are working hard'. The original words for 'give a lot of trouble' are *'meiwaku wo kakeru'* and the act of giving unnecessary trouble or annoyance to others is interpreted in Japanese culture as being a social taboo.

'A puzzle piece' and 'a block tower'

Furthermore, I asked an advanced level student in a research and study skills class to comment on responsibility in group and in individual work. Her analysis was:

I think the responsibility you have in a group is like a 'puzzle piece' and the responsibility you have when working individually is like a 'toy block'. When you work in a group, each member is given a part to study so if you combine the parts together you complete a presentation, but if one part is missing, the presentation is incomplete. So each member has to have the responsibility to work on their part and co-operate to complete a big piece of presentation. On the other hand, working individually depends on how much effort you put in your own work. If you try hard, you get a good presentation but if you become lazy, you don't get a good presentation. So it's like a block tower and each block represents the amount of effort you put into your own work. If you give up, the block tower *stumbles* and you have no piece of work at all.

Here it is observed that effort seems to be an important factor linked with the idea of responsibility. The spirit of making an effort is still prevalent in the learner's explanation such as 'If you try hard, you get a good presentation but if you become lazy, you don't get a good presentation'. Reflecting upon the nature of collaborative work, it is evident that these university students regard the individual effort of fulfilling their roles in groups to be of considerable importance.

Conclusion

To sum up, effort seems to be an important element in the learners' perceptions of collaborative learning. My discussion has been drawn from limited observations gained through my university classes in Tokyo and the implication of the importance of effort may not necessarily be applicable to a wider population of Japanese students. However, humanistic approaches in English language learning aim to foster enjoyment, minimise criticism and involve the whole person in the process of learning. Despite our effort in making collaborative learning enjoyable, 'ganbarism', the spirit of making an effort, may still remain in the mind as an indispensable motto to maximise achievement. The learners thus may want to endure the hardships involved in fulfilling a collaborative task.

When we anticipate expressions of enjoyment from learners of a particular cultural background, the feeling of enjoyment may be perceived by the learner in the effort made in the maintenance and fulfilment of their responsibility within the collaborative work. So learners' happiness may, in some cases be gained through hardships. What I have considered here is simply an example of how I consider awareness and acceptance of different perceptions about a learning experience to be a crucial factor in our developing as teachers in an international teaching environment.

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Reference

Weiner, B. 1986. *An Attributional Theory of Motivation and Emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.