Efficacy of promoting awareness in ELF communicative strategies through PBL

ELFコミュニケーションストラテジー意識づけにおける プロジェクトベース学習の有効性

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ABSTRACT

At the Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF), students interact with teachers and tutors who have different first languages and cultural backgrounds. The CELF goals are to raise student awareness of the use of language in such ELF contexts and to develop an ELF-oriented curriculum. ELF research has put forth a range of pedagogical implications. Suggestions by ELF researchers include exposing students to a "wide range of English" (Björkman, 2013, p. 191), and "promoting interactions among students themselves in the classroom" (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 110). Students should be encouraged with opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks which promote the use of such strategies as repetition, paraphrasing, clarification checks and "collaborative completion of utterances in their interactions as they negotiate meaning and co-construct understanding in English" (Kaur, 2014, p. 159). A research project incorporating these ELF insights has been developed and project-based learning (PBL) was chosen as the pedagogical approach as it provides for communication and group collaboration similar to real-world situations. Student interaction with tutors and in focus group discussions (FGD) from two classes were recorded and transcribed for analysis of their use of strategies in order to maintain efficacy in communication. Results from pre- and post-project questionnaires on student beliefs regarding their use of strategies are also discussed.

KEYWORDS: ELF, Communication Strategies, PBL, Curriculum Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Insights for English language teaching from the research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) include Kaur's (2014) assertion that students should be given

opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks which promote the use of strategies such as repetition, paraphrasing, clarification checks and "collaborative completion of utterances in their interactions as they negotiate meaning and co-construct understanding in English" (p. 159). As the goals of Tamagawa University's Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) are the promotion of teaching and learning from a global perspective and the development of effective ELF communication skills in students, research at the CELF involves the synthesis of such insights into the language curriculum and program assessments. This study continues previous work on listening and speaking assessments using a Project-Based Learning (PBL) teaching approach and focuses on student use of communication strategies in the PBL task (see Okada, Ogane, Milliner, Yujobo & Sato, 2015).

The CELF offers elementary to intermediate level classes campus-wide to approximately 2,500 undergraduates. Students meet two or three times a week, 200 minutes a week, earning four academic credits a semester. English is the main medium of communication but other linguistic resources, including but not limited to oral, written and visual modes as well as any other codes available to the participants, i.e., Japanese, are understood to be part of the user's repertoire in communication (Canagarajah, 2013). The CELF Tutor Service provides students with on-campus tutoring five days a week. The tutors, mainly CELF teachers, come from various language and cultural backgrounds, and work to engage students in ELF communication. CELF teachers are encouraged to promote language awareness in their lessons and expose their students to various kinds of English. Through the multicultural atmosphere at the CELF, it is hoped that students become more receptive to the use of English beyond the norms of native-English speakers (NESs). In addition, the CELF aims to prepare students to adapt to global trends and phenomena in communication along with the effective transfer and sharing of information. In the following sections we discuss the ELF paradigm, communication strategies from an ELF perspective, and provide an overview of and rationale for PBL.

2. ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

ELF is the "use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Although ELF includes interactions between NESs and non native-English speakers (NNESs), the majority of ELF communication occurs among NNESs who speak different first languages (Jenkins, 2015). The use of English for intercultural communication is observable not only in simple interpersonal settings but also in highly specialized domains or influential frameworks, including global business, politics, and higher education (House, 1999).

Given the characteristics of ELF, the traditional view of English proficiency

is called into question. English proficiency is widely equated with conformity to the language norms of people who speak English as a first language (Leung, 2005), and thus adherence to NES norms has been regarded as crucial in English learning. Any deviance from NES norms is considered an error or deficiency to be corrected no matter how successful the outcome is. However, this traditional view of language proficiency overlooks the fact that ELF interactions often take place with no NESs present. Even when NESs are present, their variety of English is less likely to constitute the linguistic reference norm (Seidlhofer, 2011). In fact, a number of empirical studies have found that intelligibility in ELF settings does not require conformity to NES norms and that NES proficiency per se does not guarantee successful ELF interactions (e.g., Björkman, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). For example, Seidlhofer (2011) introduces the notion of unilateral idiomaticity or the use of NES idiomatic expressions that are not intelligible to ELF speakers. Although the correct linguistic form of the idiomatic expression indicates the speaker's high proficiency from the traditional perspective, unilateral idiomaticity indicates lack of proficiency in ELF interactions since the speaker lacks concern for his or her interlocutor and neglects the need for adjusting the expression.

Proficiency is regarded differently in the ELF paradigm. Canagarajah (2006) views proficiency as "the ability to shuttle between different varieties of English and different speech communities" (p. 233). This is because ELF users currently have a number of opportunities to interact with individuals with different sociocultural backgrounds and need to deal with various linguistic forms influenced by their first languages or similects (Mauranen, 2012). This conceptualization of proficiency has put forth a range of pedagogical implications. Suggestions by ELF researchers include exposing students to a "wide range of English" (Björkman, 2013, p. 191), and "promoting interactions among students themselves in the classroom" (Matsumoto, 2011, p. 110). Exposing students to a broad range of similects is expected to raise their language awareness and increase their tolerance to different varieties of English.

ELF researchers also emphasize the use of communication strategies, which are useful in negotiating meaning and preventing communication breakdown, rather than only adherence to native linguistic forms. Examples of such communicative strategies include accommodation (manipulation of linguistic forms according to the interlocutor), repetition, paraphrasing, non-verbal strategies, hypothesis forming (Cogo & Dewey, 2012), seeking clarification, checking for understanding (Kaur, 2014), use of contextual cues (Matsumoto, 2011), and the concept of "let it pass" (Firth, 1996). Communication breakdown does not necessarily indicate that ELF users have poor proficiency (although high-proficiency ELF users can avoid communication breakdown by employing pre-emptive communication strategies). Instead, what matters is to negotiate for the meaning and normalize the interaction by incorporating appropriate communication strategies. In regards to ELF proficiency, students should be encouraged with opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks

which promote the use of such strategies as well as the negotiation of meaning and co-construction of understanding involving the collaborative completion of each other's utterances (Kaur, 2014).

3. PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

PBL is a learner-centered approach which begins with a question centering on real problems or issues. The question is followed by group work, entailing much dialogic speech among students, to develop a solution or product. Students are encouraged through sustained inquiry to work collaboratively, and use critical thinking and creativity. The PBL process fosters authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision ending in a final group presentation (Buck Institute for Education, n.d.). Proponents claim that PBL experiences increase student motivation to actively participate in projects (Bender, 2012).

The rationale for using PBL is based on the premise that dialogic speech provides opportunities to enhance communication and understanding unlike traditional teacher-centered classes which tend to be largely monologic. Monologic approaches are riskier in terms of communicative effectiveness because listeners and speakers often have little room for maneuvering and making use of discursive strategies. "Monologic events where the listener has very few opportunities if any to check his/her own understanding are where misunderstandings are most likely to occur" (Björkman, 2013, p. 182). In addition to the promotion of the use of communicative strategies by students, a PBL project approach encourages collaboration and creativity. As Kaur (2014) states, "collaborative problem-solving tasks and role plays, again based on ELF-type situations which are both meaningful and realistic, can provide learners with opportunities to use (various pragmatic) strategies" (p. 68).

4. METHODOLOGY

As part of a larger research project on ELF-oriented curriculum development, the present study focuses on student use of communication strategies during a PBL project. As many of our students will most likely be situated in multicultural and multilingual work contexts, our pedagogical goal is to develop student awareness of how speakers use strategies for effective ELF communication. Our specific question for this study is to investigate students' beliefs and practices regarding the use of communication strategies in collaborative groupwork.

4.1 Participants and the PBL Project

The participants were 47 first-year Education majors in two ELF classes. Both classes were held in the spring semester of 2015 and instructed by two of the authors. Based on the results of a TOEIC Bridge placement test administered before

the start of the semester, the students were evaluated as basic users (CEFR A2/ TOEIC 320 or below) of English and placed in elementary level ELF classes. For the PBL project, each class was divided into five groups of four to five members. The project required each group to develop a new and unique product which would assist people during a natural disaster. The task took four to five class sessions and gave a role to each member of the group. Students collaborated with their own group members and other group members, did online research and watched videos on natural disasters and temporary housing shelters. Each group was given the opportunity to consult with a CELF tutor to receive advice on how to improve their product. Each member was then required to prepare for a speaking role in a group presentation introducing the group's product. For the presentations, two or three groups from one class presented in the other class and vice versa. The authors acted as class and group facilitators.
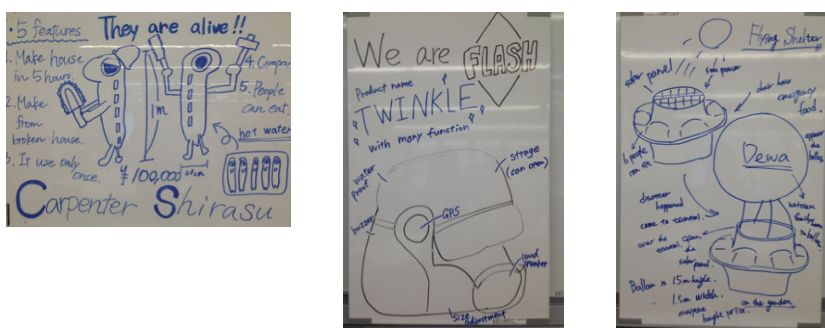

Figure 1. Sample posters for group products

Figure 2. A tutor session

4.2 Data Collection

All students were administered pre and post-project questionnaires. The bilingual (English and Japanese) online surveys consisted of thirteen Likert items on student perceptions relating to ELF strategy use, collaborative effects of PBL, critical thinking benefits of PBL, and presentation skill benefits of PBL. The surveys were completed anonymously.

The tutor sessions were held just before the group presentations. Each session included a CELF tutor and two students, the leader and assistant leader of the PBL task group. Tutors were provided with questions to support and elicit

communication strategies from the students during the session. Each session was a maximum of ten minutes in length and was audio and video recorded.

The group presentations were video recorded and followed immediately by a twenty-minute Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The FGD was used to help elicit student insights which may otherwise have remained hidden via an exchange of experiences and points of view (Green & Hart, 1999; Litosseliti, 2003). As with the group presentations, the two FGD sessions were comprised of groups from both of the classes. Each FGD was video recorded. Student and tutor verbal consent for the use of all audio and video clips for research purposes was obtained.

Figure 3. Focus group discussion

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Survey Results

The participant-response rate for both of our surveys was 100%. A pre and post-analysis of the data reveals a substantial increase in positive student perceptions of ELF strategy use, collaborative effects of PBL, critical thinking benefits of PBL, and presentation skill benefits of PBL.

Regarding students' perceptions of ELF strategy use, there is an overall increase in the post-project survey in the number of students who either agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to use repetition (up 38.3%), paraphrasing (up 53.2%), and checking for understanding (up 27.7%) to help them communicate more effectively (see Table 1). The results also indicate an increase of 14.9% in the number of students who felt that they were able to seek clarification as well as 8.5% more students who reported they could replace general terms with more specific ones to assist them to communicate more effectively. These results suggest that providing students with opportunities like those in the PBL task may help develop student awareness of the use of communication strategies.

Table 1

Comparison between student perceptions for ELF strategy use pre and post-project (n=47)

Item	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. I can use repetition to help me communicate effectively					
Pre-project	2.13	42.55	36.17	19.15	0.0
Post-project	17.02	65.96	8.51	8.51	0.0
2. I can use paraphrasing to help me communicate effectively					
Pre-project	4.26	21.28	34.04	36.17	4.26
Post-project	10.64	68.09	8.51	10.64	2.13
3. I can check for understanding to help me communicate effectively					
Pre-project	8.51	42.55	25.53	23.40	0.0
Post-project	19.15	59.57	21.28	0.0	0.0
4. I can seek clarification to help me communicate effectively					
Pre-project	12.77	36.17	25.53	23.40	2.13
Post-project	14.89	48.94	23.40	8.51	4.26
5. I can replace general terms with more specific ones to help me communicate communicatively (e.g., using 'dog' instead of 'animal')					
Pre-project	8.51	61.70	23.40	6.38	0.0
Post-project	17.02	59.57	12.77	8.51	2.13

Note. SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N=Neither Disagree nor Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

Our pre and post-project data concerning students' perceptions of the collaborative effects of PBL show an overwhelming number of students who responded positively to the two questionnaire items (see Table 2). In both the pre and post-project surveys, nearly all of the participants indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they could collaborate with their peers and, through project work, they were better able to learn English. Looking at the post-data more closely, we find a 29.8% increase among students who felt strongly that they were able to collaborate with peers on the projects and an increase of 10.6% in those who found collaboration as an effective means of learning English.

Table 2

Comparison between student perceptions of collaborative effects of PBL pre and post-project (n=47)

Item	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. I could collaborate with peers on projects.					
Pre-project	34.04	63.83	2.13	0	0
Post-project	63.83	29.79	4.26	2.13	0
2. Collaboration is helpful for me to learn English.					
Pre-project	40.43	57.45	0	2.13	0
Post-project	51.06	42.55	2.13	4.26	0

Note. SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N=Neither Disagree nor Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

In PBL, students tackle real-life issues which are thought to engage and stimulate their problem-solving skills and encourage them to think outside the box. Our findings indicate that, for the majority of the participants, the project work in this study appeared to be effective in engaging their critical and creative thinking skills. Table 3, below, shows that on average 80% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with items 1, 2, and 3 in the post-project survey (see Table 3), which, when we compare this result with the pre-project responses for the same items, equates to a 19% increase.

Table 3

Comparison between student perceptions of critical thinking benefits of PBL pre and post-project (n=47)

Item	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. I could think critically about a problem.					
Pre-project	4.26	36.17	51.06	8.51	0.0
Post-project	25.53	44.68	21.28	8.51	0.0
2. Group project work helped me to think critically about a problem better.					
Pre-project	6.38	61.70	31.91	0	0
Post-project	21.28	57.45	14.89	6.38	0
3. I could gain creative thinking skills through the project.					
Pre-project	19.15	57.45	21.28	2.13	0
Post-project	38.30	55.32	4.26	2.13	0

Note. SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N=Neither Disagree nor Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

An analysis of students' post-project perceptions of presentation skill benefits of this PBL task reveals that an average of 57% (down 8%) of students agreed and 33% (up 6%) strongly agreed that, not only did they learn how to structure and deliver a presentation through their participation in the project, the experience motivated them to learn English (see Table 4). It is important to note that although the participants in this study did not receive explicit instruction aimed at developing their presentation skills, a very small number disagreed with the three items.

Table 4

Comparison between student perceptions of presentation skill benefits of PBL pre and post-project (n=47)

Item	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1. I could learn about presentation structure through group presentation. (e.g., introduction, detail, conclusion, question)					
Pre-project	25.53	68.09	6.38	0.0	0.0
Post-project	38.30	46.81	8.51	6.38	0.0
2. I could learn about presentation skills through group presentations.					
Pre-project	6.17	61.70	2.13	0	0.0
Post-project	31.91	59.57	2.13	4.26	2.13
3. Working on a group project motivated me to learn English.					
Pre-project	19.15	65.96	12.77	2.13	0.0
Post-project	27.66	63.83	4.26	2.13	2.13

Note. SA= Strongly Agree; A= Agree; N=Neither Disagree nor Agree; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

The aim of the study was to determine whether our students would use communicative strategies in project work to help them communicate effectively, and if so, to identify the types of strategies they employ. In summing up the results, we found evidence to suggest that the kind of project work used in this study may be effective in engaging and motivating students to seek out and employ a range of communicative strategies. The project work was also perceived by students to be important for their critical and creative thinking.

5.2 Tutor Sessions

Analysis of the the tutor session transcription data revealed that the students used a variety of communication and discursive strategies. Many students used repetition to perhaps help continue their talk. In the excerpt below, the students, S1 and S2 work together, completing each other's utterances, to describe one of the features, wings, of their product to the tutor, T1.

S1   Wild wing wild wing, wing
S2   Wing looks
S1   looks wild
S2   very wild
T1   Wings look wild
S2   very wild

In the next excerpt, the tutor (T1) asks a student what her position at her company is and the student tries to come up with the English equivalent of "fuku shacho" which means vice-president. She appears to think about it and comes up with the term, "number two." This may be an example of using paraphrasing as a communication strategy.

S1   *Fuku shacho*
T1   Oh, what is that?
S1   *Ah nan daroo, fuku shacho te nan te iu dake*
        (What was it? How do we say vice-president?)
T1   Okay, we'll just
S1   Number two
T1   Number two, oh you are number two.

The tutors were provided with a discussion checklist to evaluate the use of strategies, and were asked to create opportunities for the students to use strategies. In this exchange, the tutor (T2) asks the students (S3 and S4) to repeat the advice he had just given them about their product. The students show their understanding by paraphrasing the tutor's advice. One of the students (S4) uses the word "plastic" instead of "vinyl side" and "waterproof material" to explain the second side of the product. The tutor and students appear to be working collaboratively to co-construct meaning (Kaur, 2014), that is, to establish understanding of the idea of a two-sided product. Student 4 completes the utterance by S3 and the tutor follows by linking "plastic" to "waterproof material". In the last line, S3 may be showing her understanding of "waterproof material" when she repeats the word, "rain."

T2   Vinyl side is more protection. Also, in rain. If rain, like
      a raincoat keeps you dry. Wool inside, keeps you warm, so not only wool
      but waterproof material. Do you understand? Can you tell me my idea,
      what is my suggestions? ... my advice, please repeat. My advice.
S3   One side is wool, and ...
S4   an one side is plastic
T2   Because of some material, waterproof material
S3   Rain

In checking for understanding and seeking clarification, many of the students used other resources to help keep the communication going. In explaining the fifth feature of their product, a watch, one of the students (S2) uses a verbal resource, her Japanese language, to ask, "Kore yori karui?" which means "Lighter than this?" She may be trying to check her understanding of the tutor's (T1) question "How light?"

S2   Number five watch is light
T1   Watch is light
S2   Very light
T1   Haha, not heavy
S2   Not heavy
T1   Not heavy How light? How light?
S2   *Kore yori karui? Same*

The student (S3) in the next excerpt tries to explain what kind of people will be using their product. The student appears to use the strategy of replacing a general term with more specific ones by describing "every family" as including both "rich" and "poor" families.

T1   Every family can buy this balloon?
S3   Yes
T1   Every family?
S3   Every family uh mm expens *chigau na* (no, that's wrong) rich family
T1   mm
S3   and poor family

The tutor sessions were planned as opportunities for the students to communicate in order to meet a real need, which was getting advice on product development, and to communicate with speakers of a different variety of English from their classroom teachers. The students appeared to concentrate on getting the job done, that is, to clearly explain what their product was and its features. In so doing, the students made use of a variety of communication and discursive strategies.

5.3 Focus Group Discussion Analysis

The FGD questions, provided to the students in both English and Japanese, covered topics on effective communication strategies, group collaboration, and critical thinking (see Appendix). The students were encouraged to answer in English but were also allowed to speak in Japanese. The authors translated any Japanese used by the students into English for the purpose of this research study.

When students were asked if the group project helped them learn to communicate more effectively, most students agreed. A student commented (in Japanese), "Unlike when I'm using Japanese in daily life, I was able to think about and select appropriate English expressions to make myself more easily understood." This perhaps demonstrates that the student had become familiar with the practical use of English and negotiating for meaning.

With reference to communication strategies, most students recognized gestures as a communication strategy even though it was not referred to by the teachers during the study. One student commented (in Japanese), "Through the group project, I learned that gestures can convey things we cannot convey only by speaking English." A majority of the students said that they tried using the strategies of seeking clarification and asking for confirmation during the tutor sessions. A student said (in Japanese), "When I didn't understand what the tutor was saying the first time, I tried to confirm it or asked for an explanation, and then I could understand." This student also stated that he tried again and again to confirm his understanding. When the teacher, as the FGD facilitator, asked about repetition and paraphrasing, the students indicated by nodding that they also used these communication strategies. The FGD data supports the pre and post-project survey data which indicated a strong belief among the students that they made use of a variety of communication strategies during the project.

Students noted that the project helped them share opinions and work collaboratively, both of which are necessary social skills in building relationships. They thought that good leadership and delegating appropriate tasks to each member made the project run more smoothly. Some students, however, appeared uncertain about critical thinking. This may be due to the Japanese translation of critical thinking used in this study which carries a negative connotation of criticism. The students seemed to be more receptive when discussing creativity. They confirmed that by looking at the products designed by other groups, they were able to improve their products. Although conceptualizing appeared to be the most challenging part of the project to the students, they said they would want to work on a group project again. They agreed that it was not only enjoyable but also worthwhile being assigned a specific task to achieve a goal. As one student pointed out (in Japanese), "We can be cooperative and make sentences by speaking in English through a group project." The FGD data appears to indicate that the students believed they were able to engage in cooperative and collaborative learning while familiarizing themselves with communication strategies.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study investigated, from an ELF perspective, the development of language awareness - how languages are used for effective communication - in students. Students dealt with a timely and meaningful issue through collaborative group work on a PBL project. Pre-project and post-project surveys, group work, tutor sessions and the FGD (feedback) sessions were used to help focus student attention on the use of communication strategies. Although the students did not have explicit instruction on communication strategies, the pre and post-survey data show that the students perceived that they used communication strategies. The FGD data supports this finding and the use of various types of communication strategies including repetition, paraphrasing, seeking clarification, replacing general terms with specific ones, and cooperative completion of utterances by students were found in the tutor session data.

In analyzing the tutor session data, we found that interpreting the type of communication strategy used by our students was very difficult. We need to categorize the use of communication strategies by students in an ELF context such as ours in future research studies. In an upcoming research study by the authors, the effects of pre-teaching communication strategies will also be explored.

Björkman (2013), in her study of ELF interactions in a higher educational context, found a range of pedagogical implications for the classroom and claims that interactions in group-work sessions involved the use of pragmatic strategies, and the negotiation of meaning, helps learners to understand how communicative effectiveness is actually achieved. Data from the pre and post-surveys and FGD sessions show that the students perceived the project group work used in this study as motivating and helpful to their learning. PBL was selected for this study for its focus on the learning goals of acquiring knowledge, understanding issues and gaining 21st century skills through collaborative and creative investigative group problem-solving activities (Buck Institute for Education, n.d.). If such group projects are carried out in the classroom, students may have more opportunities to think creatively and critically, and at the same time utilize communication strategies for more effective communication. We note, however, that we need to have a thorough discussion of what critical thinking involves for Japanese students.

The authors, recognizing the unique resources, specifically the multilingual and multicultural teachers, at the CELF, see PBL as an important teaching approach which can contribute to the development of language awareness. The hope is that further research on the use of communication strategies through the tools of PBL in an ELF-aware teaching context will contribute to English education in Japan.

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APPENDIX

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Did working on the group project help you learn how to communicate in English more effectively? グループ・プロジェクトに参加することによって、あなたは英語でのコミュニケーションをより効果的に学ぶことができましたか？できたとしたら、それはどのような点においてですか？具体例に説明してください。
For the Leader and Assistant Leader Only: Did talking with the tutor / consultant help you to know how to communicate more effectively by using any strategies? Using repetition? Paraphrasing? Checking for understanding? Seeking clarification? Using specific terms instead of general terms? チューターやコンサルタントと会話することによって、あなたはより効果的にコミュニケーションを行うための以下に挙げた方法を知ることが出来ましたか：何らかの戦略を使うこと、反復表現を使うこと、パラフレーズすること、相手が言ったことを正しく理解しているか確認すること、相手が言ったことに関してさらに説明を求めること、物の総称ではなく具体的な言葉を使うことなど。
Did working on the group project help you learn to work collaboratively? How? Can you give examples? グループ・プロジェクトに参加することによって、あなたは、より協調的に作業をすることを学ぶことが出来ましたか？できたとしたら、それはどのような点においてですか。具体例を挙げてください。
Did working on the group project help you learn how to think more critically? In what ways? Can you give examples? グループ・プロジェクトに参加することによって、あなたはより批判的に考えることを学ぶことが出来ましたか？できたとしたら、それはどのような点においてですか。具体例を挙げてください。

Would you like to work on a group project again? Why or why not?

あなたはもう一度グループ・プロジェクトに参加したいと思いますか？

もしくは、参加したいとは思いませんか。その理由を教えてください。