

Student Engagement through Production & Process-Oriented English Learning

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Abstract

Low student engagement has recently become a concern for higher education around the world. In Japanese EFL contexts, this issue tends to become more evident upon their entrance into university. In exploring solutions, this study investigated the impact of production & process-oriented English learning on learner engagement. Using an action research methodology, the study implemented a production & process-oriented framework in two distinct academic settings: an Academic English course and a General English course, each led by a separate researcher. An online survey was administered to measure student engagement and to elicit students' experiences and perceptions of the approach. A descriptive approach was taken to analysing data, and student feedback was analysed mainly through qualitative thematic analysis. The results showed, both studies, despite the different course contexts, yielded relatively consistent results, showing enhanced engagement across social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. While students may experience difficulties and challenges initially, the findings suggest the approach taken in this study was effective not only in raising learner engagement, but also in terms of personal growth. This paper discusses the emerging themes from two action research studies and explores their implications.

Keywords: Learner Engagement, Language Output, Active Learning, Learner-centred Approach, Production Processes, Japanese EFL Education, Higher Education.

Student Engagement through Production & Process

Student engagement is widely considered one of the most crucial contributors to academic success in higher education (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Recent reports indicate, however, that whether online or face-to-face education, an increasing number of students today are becoming distracted, disconnected, and struggling to stay engaged in class (Alonso, 2023; Daniels et al., 2016; Harvard Business Publishing Editors, 2024; Yacek & Jonas, 2019).

In the context of Japan, university students' poor engagement in the classroom has been a known phenomenon, or rather, an accepted norm, for quite some time; as a result, there is even a collective, stereotypical view of Japanese university students as reluctant, passive, silent, unwilling, and lacking academic motivation (Doyon, 2000; Egitim, 2022; Ellis & Ellis, 2014; Hyland, 1993; Kim, 2019; Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013; Manalo et al., 2006; McVeigh, 2002). Today, this may be amplified by common, problematic in-class behaviours of phone use (texting, playing video games, watching videos, etc.), chatting, sleeping, unpreparedness or other distractions.

To illustrate a typical university classroom in Japan, "students often doze off in class, come to class unprepared, and fail to be responsive" (Kim, 2019). Kim (2019) discusses that this scenario is prevalent in Japanese higher education, often causing bewilderment among international faculty members. Particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes where students are expected to play a central role, their reluctance towards active participation is often seen as problematic and, at times, disturbing (McVeigh, 2002; Talandis & Stout, 2015). "Sleeping in class" is, indeed, a common sight in the Japanese classroom as (Ellis & Ellis, 2014) point out. Calling it "endemic in Japan" by referring to the de facto social phenomenon in Japan where people sleep in public places, they contend that tolerance towards sleeping is culturally embedded in Japanese society.

While the description above may not be generalisable for all Japanese university students, for each individual's academic motivation is unique and different, many practitioners in Japan may agree that for the most part, it is not at all unreasonable. The ultimate question is then; *why* do students become disengaged in class? From the learner's perspective, a study by (Ellis & Ellis, 2014) on the topic of *sleeping in class* found that, aside from the typical reason of students' fatigue from attending club activities or part-time jobs, "boredom" was one of its main causations. Yet from the teacher's perspective, there has been a prevailing belief that Japanese students' passive learning style contributes to a demoralising atmosphere in the classroom (Egitim, 2022; Kim, 2019; Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013; McVeigh, 2002; Okano, 2018; Yasuda, 2019).

Passivity is, indeed, often characterised as an intrinsic trait of Japanese (Doi, 1986; Okano, 2018; Yasuda, 2019). Yet "passive behaviours do not arise in isolation but result from cultural scripting for passivity" (Campos, 1975, as cited in Jusik, 2021). Just as most learning is influenced by social interaction, passivity is a learned behaviour, which is shaped by various external factors, such as social structures, cultural norms, and interactions with others (Doi, 1986; Jusik, 2021; Okano, 2018). In education, "passivity will occur when the student ceases to be active....." (Jagięła, 2004, as cited in Jusik, 2021)—it is the choice of the learner to act passively, often resulting from one's careful observation of the environment where the individual belongs. Given that "traditionally, the Japanese view of a good student tended to value those who were quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform well on tests" (Nozaki, 1993, as cited in (Ellis & Ellis, 2014), Japanese learners' passive in-class behaviours could be understood as a by-product of Japan's social norms. If their outside-of-the-classroom behaviours, such as getting part-time jobs, partying, posting photos and videos on social media, and laughing and screaming on campus, are any indication of this, there still is a hope that Japanese university students can be proactively engaged in the classroom.

To address this issue at its core, it is necessary to first review why students become passive and disengaged in the classroom and examine what needs to be done to counter this phenomenon. In the sections following, this paper first presents a summary of the Japanese EFL contextual issues identified in previous studies, and then discusses the research objectives of this study.

Literature Review

Earlier studies have revealed many contextual factors potentially leading to Japanese EFL student disengagement (Ellis & Ellis, 2014; Kikuchi, 2019; Manalo et al., 2006; McVeigh, 2002; Samifanni, 2024). This has motivated researchers and educators to explore potential solutions for implementation in actual classrooms. Key issues identified in the literature, relevant to this study, are discussed alongside proposed pedagogical solutions.

Contextual Issues

1. Test-oriented, Compartmentalised English Education

It is widely acknowledged that Japan's English education heavily focuses on preparing learners for high-stakes entrance exams (McVeigh, 2002). For this reason, teaching typically centres around developing test-taking skills, where the teacher explicitly explains grammar rules, vocabulary and phrases in isolation, and reading is done through *yakudoku* (grammar translation) (McVeigh, 2002). Students study through brute force memorisation for tests, which largely consist of multiple-choice/fill-in-the-blanks questions with one correct answer (Talandis & Stout, 2015). Consequently, this compartmentalised teaching method would deprive learners of opportunities to acquire fundamental productive skills, comprehend productive processes, and most importantly, view the language holistically. Anything students study would result in fuzzy, temporary retention, or 'superficial learning' (Amerstorfer & Freiin Von Münster-Kistner, 2021). Learner boredom and classroom disengagement are likely outcomes when students focus solely on external goals like tests (Amerstorfer & Freiin Von Münster-Kistner, 2021; Samifanni, 2024).

2. Teaching Approaches and Styles

Due in part to test-driven education mentioned above, classes are mostly conducted in a teacher-centred fashion (McVeigh, 2002; Talandis & Stout, 2015). In this style of instruction where the teacher is the authority figure, instruction often involves one-way communication, from the teacher who transmits knowledge to the student, who passively sits, listens and copies what the teacher writes on the board (Doyon, 2000; McVeigh, 2002). Since the teacher precisely controls how the class proceeds, it generally leaves little room for discussion, analysis, reflection, or critical thinking. This absence of student agency would likely generate boredom and passive attitudes in learners (Doyon, 2000).

3. Scarce Output Opportunities for Authentic Language Use

The combination of these two practices would limit opportunities for students to apply their English knowledge in practical contexts. Output opportunities here would mean tasks—written or spoken—that require learners to plan, think critically, discuss, and analyse as part of a process, ultimately producing original content in the target language in an organized and logical manner. As a result, most Japanese students, if not all, have little exposure to the fundamental elements of constructing texts or utterances in English, whether at the sentence, or paragraph level. This lack of this basic knowledge may explain 1) why many students resort to translation when faced with writing or speaking tasks, and 2) why they have a sense of anxiety or difficulty with English (Cochrane, 2022), and ultimately 3) why they become disengaged.

4. Lack of Real-life Relevance

Although not exclusive to the Japanese educational context, the lack of practicality and real-life applications in university education has also been pointed out as a demotivating factor for students (Harvard Business Publishing Editors, 2024). Today's learners thrive in more hands-on, authentic learning environments, where they can develop a range of skills applicable to real-life situations (Xu et al., 2024).

Proposed Pedagogical Solutions

In response to these issues described above, numerous ideas and solutions have been put forward. On a macro level, for instance, the need for reform in the university entrance exam system has been sought and the idea of incorporating "four-skills tests as part of the university entrance admissions process" had extensively been debated (Allen, 2020). On a micro level, particularly at the classroom level, there have been growing calls for a paradigm shift in instruction—moving from traditional, teacher-centred methods to more hands-on, learner-centred approaches, such as task-/project-based learning (TBL/PBL) and communicative language teaching (CLT) (Cochrane, 2021; Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Murphy & Rian, 2014), due to their efficacy of enhancing communicative competence and promoting learner agency (Ellis, 2009).

To illustrate a few, Cutrone & Beh (2018) investigated Japanese EFL learners' willingness to communicate in English (WTC). Following Willis' 7-step TBL framework (1998), the researchers implemented tourism-themed tasks in which students performed a series of spoken activities, such as "arranging a day out with foreign friends". The study found that TBL positively influenced participants' WTC in English, likely due to the incorporation of real-life activities and the students' familiarity with the task themes. Similarly, Murphy & Rian (2014) implemented lessons that required learners to discuss some topic in an unstructured setting. Student feedback about the approach was highly positive and the authors particularly noted that "students learned English by using it, and that they experimented with the target language with other learners".

As far as learner engagement research is concerned, while it has been explored across various domains for many decades, the application of learner engagement research to language learning is relatively new (Hiver et al., 2024) for a comprehensive review. Its scarcity is especially notable within Japanese EFL. Student engagement in this context refers to the learner's cognitively active and sustained involvement in the learning process. This idea differs from motivation, which serves as the driving force behind action (Altbach, 2007). Thus, studies of student engagement are distinct from those centred on motivation.

Nonetheless, Skinner & Pitzer (2012) suggest that there is a positive correlation between learner engagement and academic achievement, which tends to strengthen through active learning approaches in collaborative learning environments. In the Japanese EFL context, a study by (Oyama, 2022b) on 71 first year university students found that students' emotions (enjoyment) in learning a foreign language (FLE) were significantly linked to self-efficacy and engagement, thereby enhancing L2 vocabulary acquisition (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

In summary, there has been a growing body of research that has highlighted positive learning outcomes in applying non-traditional approaches in Japanese EFL classrooms, yet their impact on learner engagement requires further exploration. Additionally, because approaches like TBI emphasise greater flexibility in both instruction and learner output, the specific challenges faced by Japanese EFL learners—particularly the lack of understanding of basic English structures—have not been fully addressed. This study intends to fill these research gaps (Brame, 2016).

Purpose of Study

This study aimed to empirically investigate the impact of the Sandwich Production Method (SPM), a pedagogical approach that emphasises meaningful language output and its underlying processes, on learner engagement. Using an action research methodology, the study applied this approach in two distinct academic settings within the Japanese EFL context: one in an Academic English course and the other in a General English course, each led by a separate researcher. By exploring Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of the approach, it also intends to validate the effectiveness of the SPM in enhancing learner engagement. An overview of the approach is provided in the section below.

The Sandwich Production Method Overview

Grounded on the principles of Task-based Language Learning (e.g., Ellis, 2009) and the idea of (Vygotsky's, 1978) constructivist learning theory, the SPM is a pedagogical approach that emphasises meaningful language output and its underlying processes (see Cochrane & Cochrane, 2023 for details). It was developed to address the challenges specific to the Japanese context, particularly the lack of the process of learning in language output. Similar to task - or project-based learning, language output in this approach refers to a cognitively challenging, process-oriented productive activity with a clear purpose. Within this framework, the learner is encouraged to plan, seek information, think critically, analyse in a collaborative environment, and produce original content. Although the SPM allows flexibility, some explicit instruction is recommended, depending on the learner's skill level. It may include an introduction to the mechanics of writing, such as spelling and punctuation, as well as sentence and paragraph structures. The researchers' pilot studies using this method found that students' engagement and confidence significantly increased after the introduction of these fundamental concepts. As such, when presented in a purposeful and structured manner, activities such as emails, reports, essays, presentations, and posters, can be considered cognitively challenging, process-oriented productive tasks (Helme & Clarke, 2001).

The Implementation of the Sandwich Production Method

In principle, this method employs a four-component cognitive process, "consisting of initial content production, reflection/review, exposure to authentic samples, and content reproduction, with each stage producing its own and overlapping pedagogic effects" (Cochrane & Cochrane, 2023) (Fig. 1).

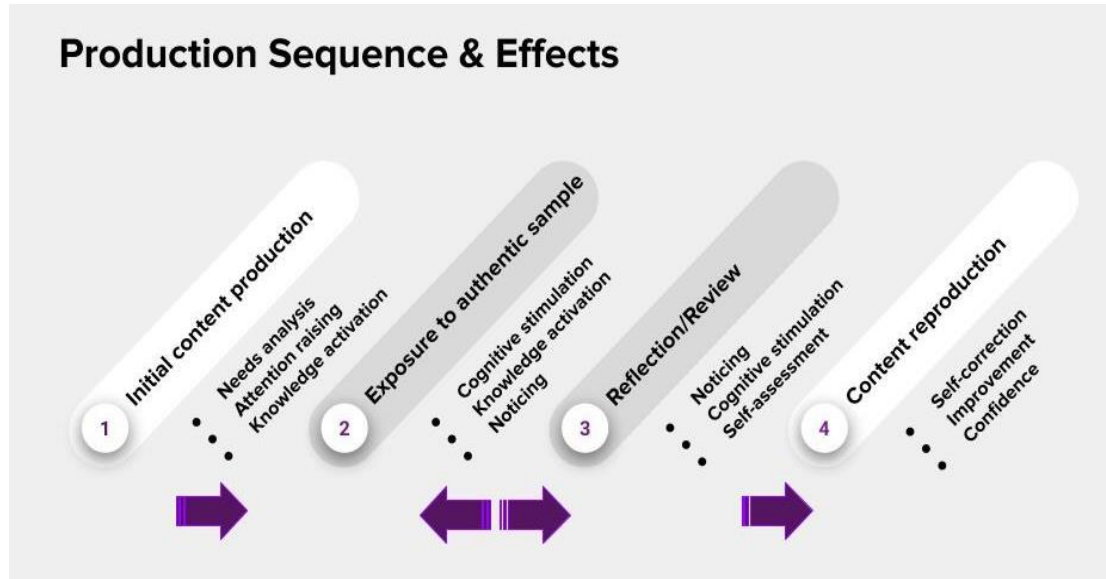


Fig. 1: Sandwich Production Method (Cochrane & Cochrane, 2023)

While all stages are equally important, the two production phases — at the beginning and end — are particularly crucial. The initial content production serves as a needs analysis for both teachers and learners, identifying knowledge gaps and learning goals. The final reproduction stage offers learners an additional opportunity to revise and apply what they have learned throughout the project. As such, incorporating “follow-up activities, such as peer reviews and revisions” in the process becomes key for implementing this method.

Research Questions

Through action research, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

Does the SPM positively affect student engagement?

- What are student perceptions of the approach?

Definitions of Terminology

To ensure clarity, the following definitions are used for terms throughout this paper.

Engagement Types (Behavioural, Cognitive, Emotional and Social)

Learner engagement is understood as a multi-faceted concept encompassing behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions, and is not exclusive to any one type. These dimensions often overlap, contributing to overall engagement (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020; Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

- **Behavioral engagement** refers to observable actions such as time on task, participation, and attention (Cents-Boonstra et al., 2020). While it is crucial for initiating learning, it alone may not lead to profound learning. It acts as the foundation for other types of engagement.
- **Cognitive engagement** involves sustained attention, mental involvement and effort, and self-regulation strategies. It reflects the level of intellectual investment, such as questioning, analysing, and seeking additional information (Daniels et al., 2016).
- **Emotional engagement** pertains to the emotional investment in a task, ranging from positive feelings like enthusiasm to negative ones such as anxiety and frustration. Positive emotional engagement is said to be correlated with greater effort and time invested in learning (Daniels et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2009).
- **Social engagement** means one’s willingness to interact with others and the feeling of belonging in collaborative environments. It occurs when an individual works with others on a task towards a shared goal (Daniels et al., 2016). Social engagement is key for language learning as learners are likely to develop and improve their linguistic competence more effectively through socialisation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Given the definitions stated above, this study posits that behavioural engagement is a default for other engagement types to follow. Thus, its emphasis is on the following three engagement components: social, cognitive, and emotional.

Methodology

This study conducted action research during the first semester of 2023, led by two researchers who implemented the Sandwith Production Method (SPM) in different academic settings: Academic English (Study 1) and General English (Study 2). A voluntary online survey was administered at the end of the course to gain insight into Japanese EFL learners' experiences and perceptions of the approach.

Outline of Action Research

Study 1 (Researcher 1): Academic English Course

The Academic English (AE) course is designed to prepare students for academic work in their senior years at the university. It centres on the academic production process, with a particular focus on developing academic writing and presentation skills. The course curriculum thus covers essential aspects of academic writing, in addition to introducing key concepts, such as objective versus subjective thinking. Students are expected to apply this knowledge through different types of research projects. Project themes were thus predetermined to some extent.

During the study, students completed two major projects: a poster on an endangered language (pair work) in the first quarter and a video describing a subculture (group work) in the second quarter. By incorporating the SPM in the process, each project required students to experience a series of core activities, such as researching, compiling data, drafting, peer reviews, debates, presentations, and reflections, with some emphasis being placed on developing key academic skills such as descriptive and persuasive writing. A detailed description of these projects is provided in Appendix 1.

Study 2 (Researcher 2): General English Course

The 15-week semester was roughly divided into two parts: The first half was dedicated to scaffolding activities or doing mini project(s) [e.g., Describing a campus facility/Restaurant reviews/Cost of living around the world], mainly to ease students' cognitive pressure. During this period, a range of tips and concepts, such as brainstorming and mind-mapping techniques, and making logical coherence, were also introduced. Much of the second half was allocated for projects. The outline of the project [Planning a Class Party Abroad (Canada, Singapore, or Australia)] used in this study is available in Appendix 2.

Regardless of project type, any project used in class followed the SPM's process of initial production, planning, researching, analysing, drafting & producing (presentation and writing), peer evaluation and a reflective activity.

Participants

Study 1 (Researcher 1): Academic English Course

This study was conducted at a private university in central Japan, involving 3 classes of first-year students (N= 66) who enrolled in the AE course. Each class consisted of approximately 20 students. Students generally perform well on receptive English tests, but their overall English proficiency varied. Of the 66 students who officially enrolled in the course, approximately half of the students (52%= n34) participated in the survey.

Study 2 (Researcher 2): General English Course

The study was carried out at a private university in Western Japan with six classes in total: three first-year classes (n= 108) consisting of students majoring in commerce, humanities, and law, and three second-year classes (n= 110) from the law, engineering, and economics departments. Each class included students with varying levels of English proficiency. Of the 108 first-year students officially enrolled, 65 (60.1%) responded to the survey, and 69 (62.7%) of the 110 second-year students participated. In total, 134 students (61.4%) out of the 218 enrolled took part in the survey.

Data Collection & Instrument (Study 1 and Study 2)

Data was collected via an online, anonymous, and voluntary survey, which was administered and posted on an institution-approved online platform for about one week after the end of the course.

Ethical Considerations (Study 1 and Study 2)

This research was designed and conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of each institution. The researchers each obtained both institutional approval and students' consent to use their responses. In class, students were briefed on the survey's general purpose and informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Survey Design

The survey was crafted based on a model developed by (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005), whose study explored “the variables that influence engagement levels” for physics courses in higher education in the USA. Their survey format was modified from the National Survey used by the U.S. government, which was intended to gauge the link between the effectiveness of non-traditional educational practices and learner engagement level.

The questionnaire for this study consisted of two parts. The first part (Part 1) included ten (10) 4-point Likert scale questions designed to assess learner engagement, which were divided into three sections, each representing one of the three engagement types: social, cognitive, and emotional. Respondents rated each question item using a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, and 4 = strongly agree). The highest possible score for each item was 4 points, the lowest 1 point, with a mean score of 2.5 points. Each question was followed by an open-ended question to capture more insights. The second part (Part 2) was an unstructured, open-ended question asking students to reflect on their overall experience with the project (hence the approach). A copy of the survey is available in Appendix 3.

Analytical Methods

The current study employed a descriptive approach to data analysis. The quantitative data gathered from the 4-point Likert scale questions were organised into tables and charts, which were then analysed by examining mean scores and the distribution of responses. Much of the unstructured text data obtained from the open-ended question was initially analysed using text mining software for visualising text sets, then qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using a coding method (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Student comments were mainly written in English for Study 1 and in Japanese for Study 2, which were translated into English by the author(s) for the purpose of this paper.

Results

Study 1 (AE)

Part 1: Likert Scale Survey Results

Table 1 and Fig. 2 show the results for Part 1 of the survey. The overall average for all responses was 3.3, with individual question ratings varying from 2.7 (Q3-1) to 3.9 (Q3-3). By engagement type, social engagement was the highest averaging 3.5 points, followed by emotional at 3.4 and cognitive at 3.2.

Table 1: Study 1 Likert Scale Questions & Results (n=34)

	Cognitive Type	STUDY 1 = n34 4-point Likert Scale Question Item	1	2	3	4	Avr pt
1-1	S	I made contributions to my group.	0	2	14	17	3.4
1-2	S	I worked with my group members outside of class to complete assignments.	0	2	8	23	3.6
2-1	C	I found some areas about the project challenging.	0	2	15	16	3.4
2-2	C/E	I lost track of time when I was at the project.	1	5	10	17	3
2-3	C/S	I consciously made efforts to do my part well and work effectively.	2	6	13	12	3.1
2-4	C	I applied and incorporated what we learned in class to the project assignments.	0	4	16	13	3.3
2-5	C/E	I thought carefully and made conscious efforts to complete the projects correctly.	0	3	16	13	3.3
3-1	E	I look forward to going to class.	2	10	18	3	2.7
3-2	E/C	The project was intriguing and interesting for me.	1	1	22	8	3.7
3-3	E/C	I have acquired new knowledge (incl. English) through this project.	0	1	14	18	3.9

Note: 1: strongly disagree, 2: somewhat disagree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: strongly agree

Scoring scale: the mean score = 2.5 points/question

Social Engagement. Q1-1 (group contribution) and 1-2 (work outside classroom) elicited above average responses, with Q1-1 averaging 3.4 points and Q1-2 at 3.6. Comments for Q1-1 primarily referred to increased opportunities to interact with classmates, or the challenges arising from social interactions such as “expressing opinions”, “being understood”, or in terms of “accomplishing tasks”. For Q1-2, “utilising LINE and Google Docs enhanced productivity”

was common, with the reasons being (for) effective collaboration. Some favoured a combination of online and offline meetings.

STUDY 1: n=34

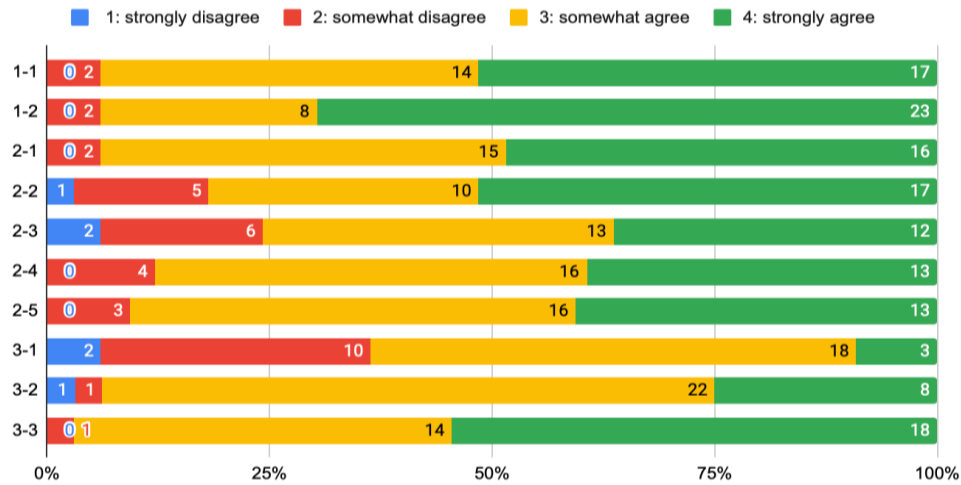


Fig. 2: (Study 1) 4-point Likert Scale Survey Result

Cognitive Engagement. The highest score in this section was for Q2-1 (challenging) scoring 3.4 points, followed by Q2-2 (lost track of time) and Q2-3 at 3.0 and 3.1, respectively. And both Q2-4 (application of learned knowledge) and Q2-5 (making conscious efforts) averaged 3.3 points. Prominent comments in this section were related to students' struggles with the projects, ranging from the use of authentic English sources and technology, to collaborating with classmates to generating original content. Time management also emerged as a key issue in Q2-2 and Q2-3, mostly relating to dealing with their unfamiliarity with assignments and use of technology while coordinating with others. For Q2-4, using class notes and examples to produce good work were most common, while some appeared focussed only on meeting deadlines and finishing projects over perfecting them. In terms of Q2-5, students reported utilising various methods, including mind mapping, peer review, and class notes.

Emotional Engagement. This section revealed notable variation in the results, encompassing both the lowest and highest scores. With a score of 2.7, Q3-1 (looking forward to going to class) ranked the lowest in the survey. Students expressed mixed feelings, ranging from pressure/anxiety about presentations, to excitement about learning new content. In contrast, Q3-2 (learner interest) received a higher-than-average score at 3.7. Students expressed their appreciation for being introduced to topics and techniques they would not typically encounter outside of the course. Subsequently, Q3-3 (newly acquired knowledge) received the highest score in this section and across the entire survey, with 3.9 points. Student comments highlighted gains in both academic skills and specific subject matter (Tran, 2023).

Study 1 (AE): Themes and Engagement Types

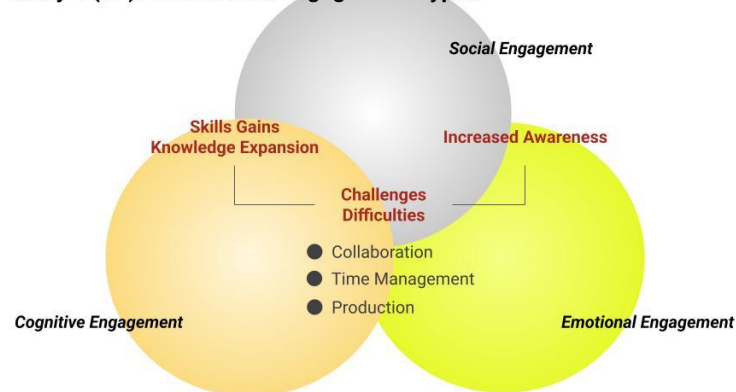


Fig. 3: (Study 1) Diagram Illustrating the Themes in Relation to Engagement Types

Part 2: Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis revealed students' various views and experiences with the approach, which can be summarised into two overarching themes: Skills Gains & Expansion of Knowledge and Increased Awareness. Between these two themes, a common pattern of Challenges/difficulties also emerged, which can be categorised into Time Management, Collaboration, and Production. Fig. 3 illustrates these themes, in relation to engagement types.

Main Themes

Skill Gains & Expansion of Knowledge. Gaining new skills and knowledge was one of the takeaway themes from the data. There were a significant number of students mentioning acquiring skills such as, research skills, computer proficiency through creating videos and slideshows, as well as enhancing their public speaking and writing abilities. In addition to these practical skills, gaining new content knowledge also arose, particularly in areas they were previously unfamiliar with or uninterested in. Some were genuinely "surprised" by their discoveries during research and expressed a "desire to continue learning" independently.

Increased Awareness. Another key theme was a heightened awareness of the sources of their specific weaknesses, which ranged from ineffective learning styles and difficulties with academic English comprehension and production, to challenges in public speaking and listening in both classroom and real-life contexts. Students also recognised the importance of "planning ahead" and acknowledge "the value of working and discussing with classmates" by noting that "peers can be a source of support, information, and enjoyment." On a more practical level, others emphasised "the importance of following a structured writing process," stating that it helped "ease the burden of writing in English." This was likely a result of their cognitive engagement with the projects, as students were not merely focused on completing tasks, but also on reflecting on how they approached and accomplished them (Weinmann et al., 2021).

Challenges/Difficulties as Common Theme

Time Management. This theme largely pertained to deadlines or time constraints for finishing project assignments. Students were self-admittedly poor at managing their time or prioritising tasks to optimise efficiency. Although time management was reported to be an issue or a source of anxiety, this was indicative of their cognitive engagement as was seen in some comments: "time passed quickly" as (we were) "aware of looming deadlines" and "constantly thinking about what needed to be done". Some even commented that they "didn't have time to get bored" as they were "always busy with something to do".

Collaboration. Collaboration also posed difficulties for some students, especially when they had to "work with unfamiliar peers" or "confront those who were not fulfilling their responsibilities". The need for managing group dynamics apparently generated a sense of anxiety or discomfort, but these challenges also provided opportunities for growth. By overcoming these challenges, they seemed to have "become more proactive in collaborative discussions" or "learned how to manage difficult collaborators". It appeared that they found solutions to mitigate the impact arising from these challenges by "using online collaboration tools" or "arranging in-person meetings".

Production. For some, the production aspect of the projects had caused stress and anxiety, mainly due to the open-ended nature of the assignments. The decision-making process of "determining the content as a group" and using "tools to produce the final submission"—was described as "nerve-wracking." Yet many students reported satisfaction from researching, creating content or learning to use digital tools they had not encountered before.

In summary, these themes reflect learners' true engagement in social, cognitive, and emotional aspects. A typical student response that highlights these emerging themes is illustrated below:

I think I learned how to write academically, how to research literature, how to work with a pair of classmates on a single project, how to create soft deadlines, how to plan and work efficiently, and that it is actually easier to brainstorm and write down ideas and what to write or talk about than to organize things in my head before writing. I noticed that I could try to do the project more efficiently and with better time allocation when I did it in pairs than when I did it as an individual. Of course, it depends on the partner in the pair, but I felt responsible for my own work because I alone and my partner were involved, and I could try to make it even better (AE Student #22).

Study 2 (GE)

Part 1: Likert Scale Survey Results

Table 2 and Fig. 4 show the results for Part 1 of the survey. Overall, student engagement in all three types scored above the mean on the survey scale. The average score of all the question responses was 3.3, with Q2-5 being the

highest at 3.7 and Q2-1 the lowest at 2.6 points. By engagement type, social engagement scored the highest, averaging 3.5 points, followed by cognitive at 3.4 and emotional at 3.3.

Social Engagement. Both Q1-1 (group contribution) and Q1-2 (work outside classroom) scored above-average points, with Q1-1 at 3.6, and Q1-2 at 3.3 points. Reasoning for Q1-1 centred around “supporting others” and “taking on more responsibility to help the group”, often accompanied by phrases, such as “proactively” and “took initiative”. In response to Q1-2, many reported having communicated with each other outside the classroom by, for instance, using an online app or meeting in person on campus, such as at the cafeteria or library.

Table 2: Study 2 Likert Question Items & Results (n=134)

	Cognitive Type	STUDY 2 = n134 4-point Likert Scale Question Item	1	2	3	4	Avg pt
1-1	S	I made contributions to my group.	1	4	44	84	3.6
1-2	S	I worked with my group members outside of class to complete assignments.	4	13	52	65	3.3
2-1	C	I found some areas about the project challenging.	16	36	71	11	2.6
2-2	C/E	I lost track of time when I was at the project.	2	11	45	76	3.5
2-3	C/S	I consciously made efforts to do my part well and work effectively.	2	12	52	68	3.4
2-4	C	I applied and incorporated what we learned in class to the project assignments.	2	4	57	71	3.5
2-5	C/E	I thought carefully and made conscious efforts to complete the projects correctly.	1	2	35	96	3.7
3-1	E	I look forward to going to class.	3	23	65	43	3.1
3-2	E/C	The project was intriguing and interesting for me.	2	15	61	54	3.3
3-3	E/C	I have acquired new knowledge (incl. English) through this project.	1	9	64	56	3.3

Note: 1: strongly disagree, 2: somewhat disagree, 3: somewhat agree, 4: strongly agree
Scoring scale: the mean score = 2.5 points/question

Cognitive Engagement. Q2-5 (making conscious efforts) had the highest score both in this section and across the entire survey, scoring 3.7 points, whereas Q2-1 (challenging), which assessed the project feasibility, had the lowest score at 2.6 points. The second highest in this section were Q2-2 (lost track of time) and 2-4 (application of learned knowledge), both averaging 3.5 points. Reasons for Q2-2 (why they felt ‘lost track of time’) were mostly (I was) “focused” or “involved” in the task or group discussion, in addition to the pressure relating to the deadlines for each task. Responses to Questions 2-4 highlighted a variety of techniques and knowledge, including mind mapping, structural writing, the use of synonyms, and peer review—all reflecting the desire expressed in Question 2-5 to produce the best possible work.

STUDY 2: n=134

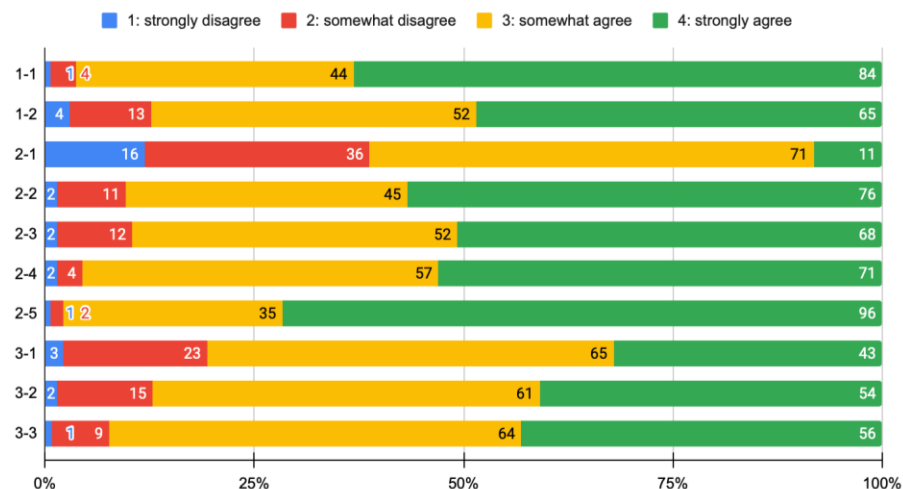


Fig. 4: (Study 2) 4-point Likert Scale Survey Results

Emotional Engagement. This segment averaged a score of 3, with Q3-1 (looking forward to coming to class) at 3.1, and both Q3-2 (learner interest) and Q3-3 (newly acquired knowledge) at 3.3. For Q3-1, many referred to the collaborative aspect of the project, including “feeling obligated” not to “let down my group members.” For both Q3-2 and Q3-3, many students valued the practicality and usefulness of the project, particularly its hands-on nature. Closely tied to social engagement, many described collaborative learning as beneficial and efficient, particularly in terms of developing social skills, or knowledge of “how to write in English” and “economy, culture, and social norms of other countries.”

Part 2: Qualitative Results

Fig. 5 illustrates the emerging themes from the data, in relation to engagement types. Consistent with the quantitative results, the social aspect of the approach was particularly valued. The areas explicitly emphasised in student feedback were summarised into instructional style, self-awareness, and skills/knowledge gains, with the underlying theme of collaborative learning. Some opposing views were also put forward, which are discussed later in this section.

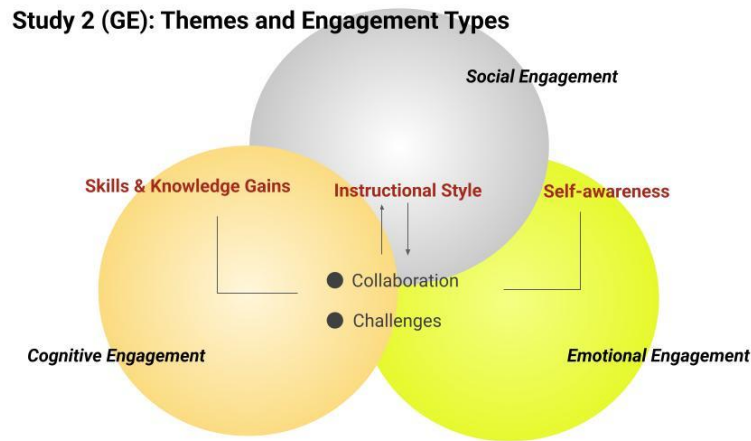


Fig. 5: (Study 2) Diagram Illustrating the Themes in Relation to Engagement Types

Main Themes

Instructional Style. This theme highlights learners’ preference for student-centred learning over traditional, teacher-centred instruction. Students appreciated the hands-on nature of the SPM, noting its benefits in terms of gaining knowledge through active participation and collaboration. Comparing it to the usual grammar-focused classes or one-way communication lectures, it elicited comments like “unlike lecture style courses, I enjoyed English in many ways” or “I wish there were more classes like this one.”

Self-awareness. Closely related to the first theme, this theme is about how they started to see their own learning more objectively. For instance, some articulated a change (or the need for change) in their attitudes towards learning, particularly from being “passive to becoming more proactive”, or a change in their emotions, from “worried/nervous” to “excited or satisfied”. Apparently, the approach had impacted students’ perceived difficulty of English as well, where many said they realised English was not as difficult as they always thought. This was achieved by “actually using it in context” and by knowing “how to use it”, thereby inspiring some to “continue studying English” on their own.

Skills and Knowledge Gains. This theme covered a broad range of competencies, including English skills, computer skills, and soft skills such as communication, analytical/problem-solving, and leadership. These transferable skills were highly valued by students, particularly as they were beneficial in the workplace. One student further noticed, “(I realised) I can apply the logic of English when speaking and writing in Japanese for better communication” (Jenkins, 2015).

Underlying Themes

The three themes that emerged from the data shared an underlying focus on ‘collaborative learning’. This suggests that students’ positive perceptions of the approach, along with their increased self-awareness and gains in skills and knowledge, were largely driven by the collaborative nature of the experience. Students highlighted the value of group presentations, peer reviews, and reflective activities, which, they felt, not only supported their English learning but

also promoted a more objective perspective. In other words, without collaboration, it is highly unlikely the same outcomes would have been achieved.

In terms of students' opposing views, they centred around 'challenges/difficulties' pertaining to 'task complexity', 'English' 'time management' and 'group work.' As students progressed through the learning process, this sense of anxiety and difficulties appeared have diminished. However, some student stated issues with group work remained, citing 'unfairness' in skill levels between groups and discomfort in collaborating with certain members. Group formation was thus suggested being randomised and managed by the instructor to maintain fairness.

In sum, the emerging themes suggest that most respondents were socially, cognitively, and emotionally engaged, each speaking from their own unique perspective. This section concludes with representative student comments that capture and reflect these perspectives.

This was my first time working on a large project on a single theme. The presentation allowed us to interact with other groups, and by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, we were able to consider ways to improve our own work. This experience made me excited about doing work as a team. During our research, I got to know about the general cost of living, famous attractions, and the overall atmosphere of Singapore. While calculating prices, I also compared them to those in Japan, which deepened my interest in Singapore. Although we had a time management issue, I think we did quite well. We shared our ideas openly and made sure to reflect each person's opinions. We also managed to create the presentation script with a balanced amount of content for each person." (GE, 1st-year, Student #46)

I learned how to explain things concisely in English. Through group work, I realised the importance of everyone taking responsibility and collaborating to achieve a common goal, which gave me a sense of accomplishment. This experience also changed my belief that 'I can't speak English because it's too difficult.'" (GE, 2nd-year, Student #29)

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results presented in the previous section, this section discusses the efficacy of the SPM by answering the research questions established for this study. The discussion centres on learner perceptions of the approach that may have contributed to engagement or disengagement in the classroom.

Does the Sandwith Production Method positively affect student engagement?

- What are student perceptions of the approach?

The findings suggest that the SPM was effective in enhancing learner engagement, across all three engagement types, and regardless of academic content, student proficiency, or instructor. This was evident in the data from the Likert scale survey, which showed high learner engagement across all types—social, cognitive, and emotional—averaging 3.3 points for both Study 1 and Study 2. While the intent of this research was not to compare the two studies, it is noteworthy that both achieved similar results. Notable differences included Q3-1 (emotion), asking about students' feelings regarding attending class. The respondents in Study 1 were neutral or less enthusiastic, with a score of 2.7, while Study 2 had a higher average with 3.1. Student feedback suggests that this difference was likely attributed to the nature of the courses: AE focused on projects including a more rigorous academic undertaking, whereas the project in GE were more familiar, real-life tasks. The content differences reflected in the difficulty and feasibility questions (Q2-1), with Study 1 (AE) scoring 3.4 and Study 2 (GE) the lowest at 2.6. This also likely influenced perceptions of overall knowledge gains (Q3-3), where Study 1 achieved the highest score of 3.9 across both studies.

Student Perceptions and Implications

The themes that emerged from the qualitative data provide a clear picture of student perceptions of this approach, which would correspond its effects. To summarise the results, both studies identified nearly identical core themes of skill/knowledge gains and learner awareness; each encompassing the underlying themes of challenge/difficulties and collaborative learning. Learner perceptions of the approach were therefore strikingly similar between both studies, with slight variations in student feedback.

It is noteworthy that while each of the themes may appear isolated, the data showed there was a cause-effect relationship between them. For instance, student perceptions of skill/knowledge gains seemed to have risen from collaborative learning and/or the challenges they faced. Similarly, increased self-awareness—such as recognising personal weaknesses or the need to take ownership of their learning—was closely tied to working with others and/or overcoming challenges with the projects. This common issue of difficulties/challenges is, in fact, "crucial to the learning process, particularly when students are developing more sophisticated understandings of complex concepts (Lodge et al., 2018)". As demonstrated in this study, students initially encountered anxiety and discomfort, yet these

challenges were essential for fostering engagement (Lodge et al., 2018). Overcoming such difficulties have apparently led students to recognise that their struggles were integral to their achievements, ultimately contributing to their perceived knowledge gains and heightened self-awareness.

In concluding, the findings also suggest that the SPM was not only effective in raising learner engagement but also influenced student learning in several ways. It allows learners to 1) develop a clear understanding of how the English language truly works, 2) start to see the language as a tool for communication, while 3) also stimulating their creativity and 4) fostering a sense of confidence and learner agency. While students may face challenges, with some guidance, most—if not all—students rise to those challenges and actively seek solutions. Japanese university students may therefore be more prepared to move on to more authentic learning that we think.

Returning to the issue of student disengagement or boredom, this was not a major concern in either study. In fact, some students began asking questions during and after the project on topics such as vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, and did not seem hesitant to speak up (often on behalf of the group). This slight change in their behaviour suggests that when students are cognitively involved, the problems with disengagement would resolve on its own.

Limitations and Research Suggestions

This study has a few limitations. First, while both studies observed generally high learner engagement, not all students were engaged from the start; some become more involved over time and others remained disengaged. Second, both studies had relatively small sample sizes, with just over half of the students responding to the survey, likely due to voluntary participation. Future research could benefit from a larger, mandatory survey. Third, more research is needed to improve and to further validate the efficacy of the approach by implementing this approach in broader EFL contexts, both within Japan and internationally.

Conflict of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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