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Building Teacher Agency Through Collaborative Lesson Planning: Student Teachers' Evaluative Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores collaborative lesson planning (CLP) in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education program in Japan, with a focus on student teachers' peer assessments. Amid ongoing education reforms that emphasize teacher collaboration and curriculum management, CLP serves as a platform for developing lesson design, curriculum alignment, and teamwork skills. This study investigates two key questions: (a) What aspects of peers' work in CLP do student teachers evaluate? and (b) What justifications do they provide for their evaluations? Nineteen student teachers participated in a 10-week CLP task, designing a 50-minute English lesson and providing written peer assessments. Content analysis, integrating text mining techniques and constant comparison analysis, revealed that participants evaluated their peers from multiple perspectives. Patterns emerged regarding differences in evaluation tendencies based on sex and English language proficiency. Male participants tended to prefer formal verbal interactions, while female participants were more inclined to prioritize group cohesion and harmony. Participants with high English language proficiency emphasized logical reasoning and critical thinking, often assuming leadership roles, yet sometimes faced challenges in collaborative engagement. These findings underscore the importance of balanced group composition in supporting different collaboration styles and maximizing CLP effectiveness. This study highlights the value of rubric-free peer assessments in capturing diverse perspectives and nuanced evaluations, granting student teachers greater autonomy in defining effective collaboration. The results have broad implications for teacher education worldwide, advocating for structured CLP practices that cultivate both pedagogical and interpersonal skills essential for future agentic teachers.

Keywords: Collaborative lesson planning, peer assessment, student teachers, teacher collaboration, teacher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of successful contemporary education reforms lies in agentic teachers and effective collaboration among them (Fullan, 2015; Geert, 2006; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Nagamine, 2023b). Over the past five years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has implemented a series of drastic education reforms to improve English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The national curriculum guidelines, known as *The Course of Study*, have undergone major revisions. The updates include (but are not restricted to) the introduction of early English education into elementary school curricula, the alignment of skills-based instructional goals and lesson content with diversified evaluation methods, an emphasis on communicative activities that require students to apply higher-order thinking skills in senior high schools, and the mandated application of a backward design approach to lesson planning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Because all of these measures are new to English teachers in Japan, the importance of curriculum management has increasingly been recognized, and this recognition highlights the urgent need for teacher collaboration not only among teachers in a local school setting but also across different school levels (i.e., elementary, junior high, and senior high schools). Effective collaboration among teachers is hence essential for implementing curriculum reforms and fostering pedagogical innovation. In this regard, the following remark by Kibler and Palacios (2022, p. 5) is particularly relevant, as it also applies to English teachers in Japan:

We have seen the common but problematic interpretation of the “one teach, one assist” model, in which an ESL teacher attends the class with students to help them individually, but teachers do not collaborate on planning, leading instruction, assessment, or reflection. (Kibler & Palacios, 2022, p. 5)

Teacher collaboration is a complex phenomenon. Numerous contextual factors affect its quality (Carroll et al., 2021), such as school and teacher cultures (Hargreaves, 2019; Lewis, 2002; Nagamine, 2023b; Smith & Pellegrini, 2000), working conditions (Day & Lee, 2011; Goodson, 2003), teacher morale and motivation (Reio, 2011; Reio & Lasky, 2007), teacher cognition and emotions (Akiba et al., 2019; Borg, 2006; Fullan, 2015; Leithwood & Beatty, 2008; Martínez Agudo, 2018; Nishino, 2012; Schutz & Zembylas, 2011; Veen & Slegers, 2011), teacher well-being (Bouchrika, 2025; Nagamine, 2018, 2023a), communication with administrative staff and colleagues (McHenry, 2009; Price, 2011), and relationships not only with students but also with other stakeholders, including students' parents, local board of education staff members, and researchers (Avgitidou, 2009; Bruce et al., 2011; Hall & Simeral, 2008; Hargreaves, 2019; Kibler & Palacios, 2022; McHenry, 2009). These factors, among others, can either hinder or facilitate teacher collaboration in school environments. Moreover, the ultimate goal of teacher collaboration goes beyond structured education reform, aiming to better support students in achieving higher academic outcomes (Angus-Cole, 2021; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Mora-Ruano et al., 2019; Pischetola et al., 2023; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2017).

Despite these insights, fundamental questions remain unanswered. Specifically, there is still limited clarity regarding what constitutes effective teacher collaboration, the various forms it may take, how these different forms impact outcomes, and the conditions under which collaboration is most beneficial—or potentially counterproductive (Hargreaves, 2019; Levine & Marcus, 2010). This uncertainty extends to teacher education contexts, where it is generally agreed that student teachers should have ample opportunities to engage in collaborative tasks during their training to develop a deeper understanding of teachers' multifaceted roles and responsibilities (Farrell, 2006). Effective collaboration hinges on meaningful dialogue, which thrives in an environment of psychological safety where student teachers can challenge one another, engage in constructive critique, and deepen their collective understanding (Jong et al., 2022; Levine & Marcus, 2010). However, the quality and trajectory of such dialogue are shaped by student teachers' perceptions, cognitive processes, and emotional responses. While positive dissonance can foster deeper learning (Gutiérrez, 2020), ignoring student teachers' cognitive and

emotional states or inducing it artificially may lead to contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 2019), undermining authentic and effective collaboration.

Although these dynamics play a critical role, empirical research on the nature, quality, and impact of collaboration in student teachers' learning and professional development remains particularly scarce in EFL teacher education contexts. This study was designed in response to these contextual considerations and pursues two primary objectives. First, it examines student teachers' cognitive and emotional processes as they engage in collaborative lesson planning (CLP). Second, it identifies key considerations for teacher educators, particularly the factors they should anticipate or address to ensure the effective implementation of CLP.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teaching Stages and CLP

Teaching is generally divided into three stages: the prelesson, lesson, and postlesson stages. Among these stages, the prelesson stage is particularly critical, as it largely determines the overall effectiveness of instruction (Bassett et al., 2013; Gutierrez, 2020; A. Johnson, 2000; Kang, 2017; König et al., 2019; Mutton et al., 2011; Rusznyak & Walton, 2011). Fautley and Savage (2013) emphasize the importance of lesson planning in the prelesson stage in the context of initial teacher training. Similarly, Mendoza et al. (2022) argue that CLP is a key factor influencing the success or failure of a curriculum reform. When appropriately introduced and guided by teacher educators, CLP provides numerous benefits for student teachers (Hiebert & Stigler, 2000; Rahman, 2019).

One of the most significant advantages of CLP is its role in fostering student teachers' professional growth and reflective practice (Mendoza et al., 2022). Through CLP, student teachers engage in meaningful discussions, collaboratively brainstorm and generate innovative ideas, leverage their collective creativity, critically reflect on their instructional choices, and exchange constructive feedback (cf. Gutierrez, 2020). This process enables them to refine their lesson plans, identify potential areas for improvement, and enhance their confidence in their teaching abilities. Such reflective practice is essential for making informed pedagogical decisions in future teaching contexts (Farrell, 2007, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2011). Furthermore, CLP fosters a sense of teamwork and shared responsibility, thereby establishing a supportive environment for professional development (Akiba et al., 2019).

2.2 CLP and Education Reforms

Amid major education reforms, as in the case of Japan, CLP can help student teachers develop a deeper understanding of the new national curriculum guidelines and the relevance of those guidelines to their teaching practices. By engaging in collaborative decision-making, student teachers can gain insights into the rationales underlying education reforms, curriculum standards, and instructional outcomes, which in turn can enable them to acquire an ability that Japanese teachers have previously lacked, that is, curriculum management skills (cf. Akiba et al., 2019; Nagamine, 2023b).

MEXT recently highlighted curriculum management skills, and scholars and policy-makers have often discussed such skills in relation to ongoing reforms (MEXT, 2015). This phenomenon arises from the recognition of Japanese teachers' weaknesses with regard to the creative development of effective lessons that are in line with the national curriculum guidelines (Lewis, 2002; Nagamine, 2023b). Although teachers in Japan excel at implementing lesson study with their colleagues, in which context they observe each other's lessons and discuss improvements, they have difficulties with regard to the individual development of lesson plans based on a clear, long-term vision of the learning outcomes; instead, they rely heavily on government-authorized textbooks and teaching materials (Nagamine, 2017). Moreover, they are likely to struggle to acquire the skills necessary to develop and use various curriculum-aligned assessment tools

(Nishioka, 2008) because, until recently, coherence between assessment methods and instructional goals has been underestimated when designing lessons or even neglected entirely.

Therefore, the current education reforms require teachers to increase their repertoire of evaluation methods to include formative as well as summative performance-based in-class assessments rather than testing students' memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary lists using paper-based written tests (Nagamine, 2023a). This requirement is the main reason why backward design, an approach to curriculum planning outlined by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), was promoted by regional boards of education throughout Japan as an essential component of curriculum management (cf. Nishioka, 2008). The prelesson stage, in which teachers are required to select appropriate evaluation methods that match the lesson content and objectives, is a challenging yet critical phase of teaching; this claim is particularly true for novice and preservice teachers (Beckmann & Ehmke, 2023; Mutton et al., 2011; Rusznyak & Walton, 2011).

2.3 Peer Assessment of CLP

Peer assessment was employed in this study not only to determine educational effectiveness but also as a means of data collection. Peer assessment of CLP can provide additional benefits for student teachers; for instance, it helps ensure the quality of their lesson plans. Student teachers can strengthen their comprehension of the material, critically evaluate their decision-making and behaviors from many perspectives, and highlight opportunities for growth by reflecting on both their own overall CLP experiences and those of their peers (Hwang et al., 2014; Reinholz, 2016; Topping, 2013). Hence, peer assessment can enhance student teachers' continuous reflection and refinement, even after they have completed the course. Moreover, they can develop their communication skills by being aware of different perspectives in the process of working toward a common goal (i.e., the development of effective lessons) (Akiba et al., 2019; Hargreaves, 2019). Engaging in peer assessment and CLP empowers student teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and their ability to evaluate their own work (cf. Hwang et al., 2014). The aggregate of such positive effects can help them enhance their teacher agency, job satisfaction, and professional well-being in their future careers (B. Johnson, 2003; Mostafa & Pál, 2018; OECD, 2014; Price, 2011; Stearns et al., 2015).

Despite the aforementioned benefits, however, CLP and peer assessment can pose some challenges (Bryant & Carless, 2010; Gao, 2009; Harris & Brown, 2013; van Gennip et al., 2010). For instance, differences in teaching methods and styles among student teachers can lead to conflicts (see Gutierrez, 2020). Some student teachers may feel hesitant about evaluating the work of their peers; others may feel uncomfortable when they are evaluated by their peers. In addition, the Japanese cultural norm of distinguishing between *honne* (honest feelings) and *tatemae* (public stance/facade) may make it difficult for student teachers to make appropriate judgments. In the contexts of EFL teacher education, there is a notable lack of prior research focusing on student teachers' practices of CLP and their peer assessment. This gap in the literature underscores the significance of investigating these areas, as such research could yield valuable insights that contribute to the development of effective teachers who will shape the future of the EFL profession.

3. METHODS

3.1 Objectives and Research Questions

A qualitative study was designed and conducted to gain insight into student teachers' perspectives on CLP in an EFL teacher education course (i.e., EFL Teaching Methodology) offered at a private university in Japan. Peer assessment was implemented for two purposes: to enhance student teachers' learning and to collect primary qualitative data. Two research questions were formulated prior to the study: (a) What aspects of peers' work in CLP do student teachers evaluate? and (b) What justifications do student teachers provide for their evaluations?

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

Primary data were collected from a cohort of 19 student teachers enrolled in the highest-level class among four EFL Teaching Methodology courses. This particular course, “EFL Teaching Methodology II,” is a required prerequisite for the teaching practicum. Participants were selected using purposive convenience sampling, one of the non-probability sampling techniques. Selection criteria include (a) student teachers planning to undertake a teaching practicum in the following academic year and (b) those who met the minimum English language proficiency requirement (TOEIC score of 600 or above). The 19 participants (9 males and 10 females) were divided into five groups: four groups of four members and one group of three. Notably, large differences were observed in the participants’ levels of English language proficiency. To ensure a mixture of participants with lower and higher English language proficiency within each group, the group compositions were carefully considered by reference to participants’ Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) scores.

Participants were assigned a CLP task requiring them to design a 50-minute English-mediated lesson for Japanese senior high school students, drawing on the skills and knowledge gained from their three previous methodology courses. The task emphasized the application of the backward design approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Each group was asked to select instructional materials and then to analyze the content and structure of the instructional unit, which consisted of approximately five to six class sessions. Participants were subsequently asked to clarify unit-focused instructional goals (desired results), determine what would constitute acceptable evidence that these results were obtained, and establish concrete lesson objectives alongside appropriate assessment criteria and measures for the 50-minute lesson. Once these procedures were completed, each group was directed to deliberate on innovative approaches to lesson delivery and in-class assessment. All participants had been made aware of the importance of these procedures and their theoretical foundations in the three previous teaching methodology courses. The preparation period was 10 weeks. After this 10-week period, the participants were asked to perform teaching demonstrations in class based on their lesson plans. They were further asked to reflect on their CLP experience and engage in individual peer assessment. The primary data used in this study were participants’ written peer assessments, in which context a total of 434 sentences (15,413 words) were collected. The following directions were given to the participants: “Reflect on the entire process of preparing a lesson for senior high school students, which includes the collaborative development of a lesson plan, group discussions on various matters, individual as well as group preparation for the teaching demonstration, and performance on the day of the demonstration. How do you evaluate the other group members? Provide your evaluation for each group member in a written passage of approximately 500 Japanese characters (a minimum of 400 characters for each group member) that describes the content and rationale underlying your evaluation.”

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Although a qualitative design was employed, the content analysis conducted for this study included the quantification of text data using data mining techniques. The data analysis procedures involved two major phases. The first such phase focused on data mining, which included quantitative text-data analyses using the text mining software KH Coder (Ver. 3.Beta.07d) (Higuchi, 2023). Various data characteristics were objectively analyzed using KH Coder to capture general tendencies of the overall dataset, mainly regarding word frequencies, the usage of an individual word in context (Key Word in Context [KWIC] concordance analysis), and the interrelationships among individual words (e.g., cooccurrence network analysis, correspondence analysis) (Higuchi, 2016). The second phase involved a constant comparison analysis, which is usually employed in the grounded theory approach (GTA) (Glaser, 1978, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). In this phase, three types of coding (open, axial, and selective) were implemented using MAXQDA 2022 Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2021) software. Storylines were then developed and examined to formulate themes and meta-themes

that were used to explain the targeted phenomena (i.e., student teachers' perspectives on CLP) (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

4. FINDINGS

4.1 General Tendencies Observed in the Dataset

The first phase of data analysis (data mining using KH Coder) revealed that “*kyugyo*” (lesson/class) was the most frequently used word across all participant texts (221 times), followed by “*gurupu*” (group; 127 times), “*iken*” (opinion; 111 times), and “*mogi kyugyo*” (teaching demonstration; 89 times). A correspondence analysis was also conducted with two categorical variables: participants' sex (Male [M], Female [F]) and English language proficiency. Regarding English language proficiency, four classifications were developed on the basis of participants' TOEIC scores: Superior (S; 800 and above), High (H; between 700 and 799), Mid (M; between 600 and 699), and Low (L; 599 or below).

Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the correspondence analysis. Dimensions are plotted to indicate the relationships among variables. The closer the plotted variables are to the origin, the fewer distinctive features they possess. Words that are plotted closely together on the map, particularly those that form clusters, are strongly associated with one another.

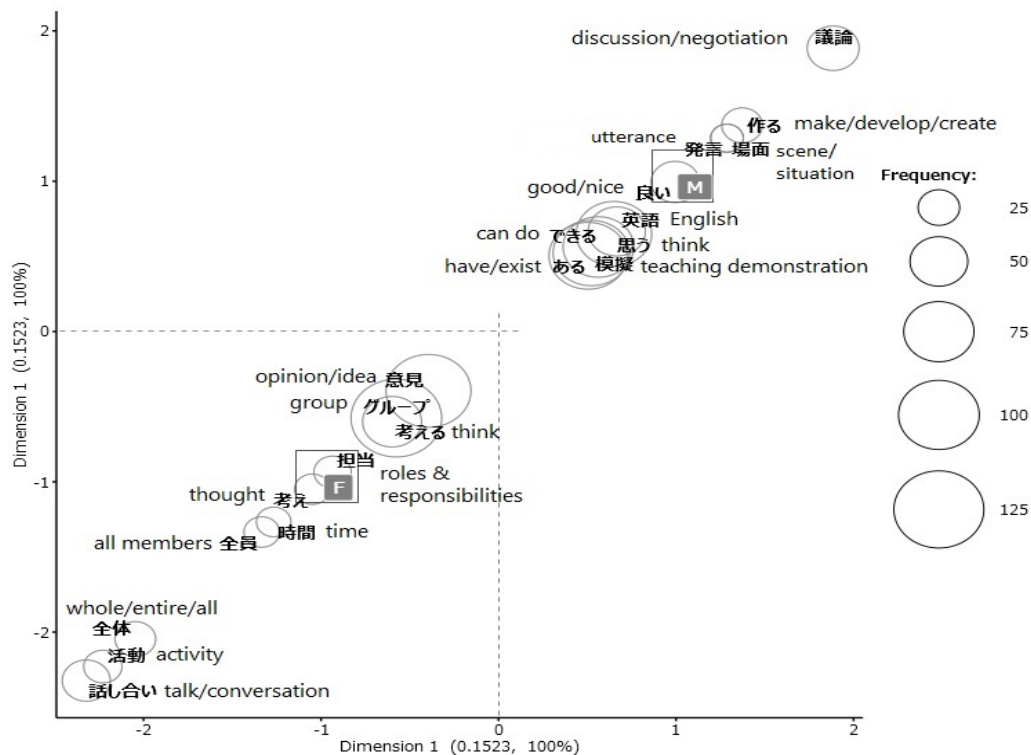


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis map of participants' sex and words.

In Figure 1, “*giron*” (discussion/negotiation) and “*hanashiai*” (talk/conversation) are located farthest from the map origin, thereby exhibiting the greatest significance (i.e., they represent the most distinctive characteristics of each sex). Male participants preferred the word “*giron*”, while female participants favored “*hanashiai*”. Although there are subtle distinctions between these terms, it appears that male participants tended to prefer verbal interactions involving a critical perspective or a higher degree of formality, whereas female participants did not exhibit this preference.

The second most significant distinction pertains to the female participants' tendency to use the words “*zentai*” (whole/entire/all), “*katsudo*” (activities), and “*zenin*” (all members). This finding implies that female participants prioritized harmony and a sense of solidarity within the group. Male participants, on the other hand, used the words “*tsukuru*” (make/develop/create), “*hatsugen*” (utterance), and “*bamen*” (scene/situation). Male participants tended to mention other members' English language proficiency in relation to other members' teaching demonstration performance. Additionally, male participants used “*yoi*” (good/nice) more frequently to express positive sentiments than female participants.

Correspondence analysis of participants' English language proficiency and words revealed that participants with the highest level of English language proficiency (S) exhibited a tendency to focus on group members' attitudes (*shisei*) toward problem solving as well as effective cooperation and collaboration (see Figure 2); that is, they focused on what an individual member was able to do or achieve on their own rather than what the group had done or accomplished collectively. Their preference for the term “*giron*” rather than “*hanashiai*” was also observed. On the other hand, participants with the lowest level of English language proficiency (L) paid attention to various scenes/situations (*bamen*), such as situations feature conflicting opinions and problem solving and specific lesson planning and teaching demonstration scenarios. In addition, these participants were more inclined to describe the degree to which each member contributed and the corresponding impact on the group using the word “*totemo*” (very/greatly).

Participants with mid-level English language proficiency (M) emphasized each group member's assigned part (*paato*) of a 50-minute lesson, the progression (*susumeru*) of the group's talk or conversation (*hanashiai*), and how each member proceeded (*susumeru*) to deliver a lesson. These participants also tended to focus on group members' nonverbal as well as verbal behaviors and performances on the day of the teaching demonstration (*jitsuen*). No significant tendencies were found among participants with high English language proficiency (H).

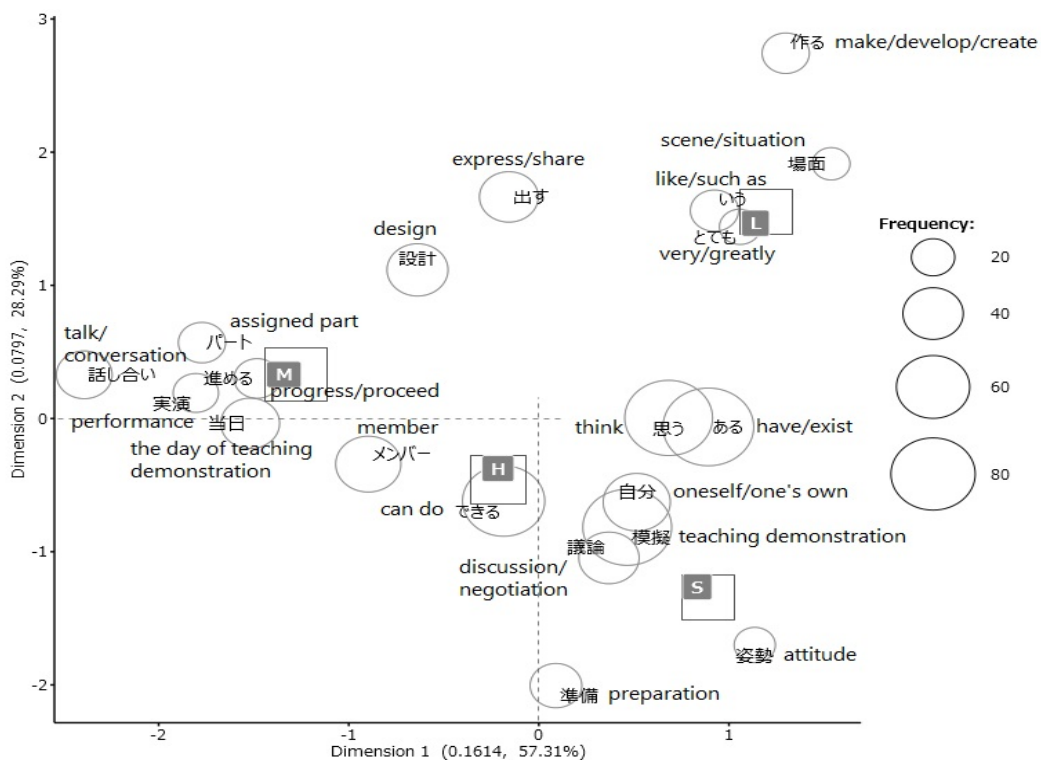


Figure 2. Correspondence analysis map of English language proficiency and words.

4.2 The Constant Comparison Analysis

During the second phase of the data analysis (a constant comparison analysis), a total of 195 codes were generated, 120 of which were classified as “positive evaluations” and 29 as “negative evaluations”. Furthermore, 46 codes were categorized as “personal opinions without evaluations”, including comments such as “I felt inferior to other members because of my own abilities within this group”, “I now understand that having a strong will is crucial not only to overcome anxiety but also to navigate various challenges”, and “I want to collaborate with him and work together in the future”. All codes were further categorized on the basis of the content of the text, and participants' evaluation criteria were identified in the process (Table 1). Table 1 shows that the participants evaluated various aspects of their peers during CLP. Notably, they focused not only on their peers' English language proficiency and professional knowledge but also on their cognitive and collaborative skills and personal traits/factors.

Disagreements and differences in perspective became evident among the participants, particularly during the initial stages of discussion concerning the instructional objectives and the assessment criteria and measures. These disagreements contributed to a noticeable atmosphere of tension in some groups. Several participants occasionally expressed feelings of discomfort toward other participants who were conspicuously reticent.

Nonetheless, throughout the 10-week preparation period, the roles, positions, and responsibilities of individual participants in each group became more clearly defined. This clarity fostered a sincere commitment to thorough negotiation and dedication to the shared goal of conducting effective teaching demonstrations. At least one participant in each group took the initiative to moderate group discussions efficiently. Some participants adeptly summarized points of disagreement and actively worked toward consensus-building. Additionally, some participants refrained from asserting their own views and instead focused on listening attentively to other group members. These changes in behavior were observed throughout the 10-week period.

Table 1. Participants' evaluation criteria and key words.

Evaluation criteria	Key words observed in the text data
English language proficiency	Fluency, accuracy, proficiency, speaking skills
Cognitive skills	Ideas/opinions, constructive feedback, logical reasoning, critical thinking, analytical skills, synthetic skills, integrative skills, awareness of students, decision-making ability, indecisiveness, articulation of thoughts
Collaborative skills	Leadership/initiative, assertiveness, listening attentively, consideration/support for group members, problem-solving skills, communication skills, taking on tasks beyond one's responsibilities, providing useful information
Personal traits/factors	Proactiveness, calmness, being objective/fair, motivation, enthusiasm, sincerity, sense of responsibility, kindness toward others, introvert/extrovert personality
Professional knowledge	Relating/connecting to other methodological course content, application of concepts/constructs, use of backward design
Performance of teaching demonstration	Nervousness, anxiety, improvisation, flexibility, adaptability, flow of a lesson, atmosphere creation

In the following sections, major findings regarding the participants' justifications are discussed alongside the relevant themes and meta-themes that emerged from the constant comparison analysis. Excerpts from participants' written evaluations are also presented to highlight the findings of this study.

4.2.1 Collaborative skills and cognitive skills

Among the various cognitive skills, the participants prioritized logical reasoning and critical thinking skills in their evaluations. They tended to value the ability to logically explain and provide persuasive reasoning for the opinions and ideas expressed in the context of CLP. In

addition, they include the skill of thinking critically and constructively about other members' opinions and ideas.

- (1) She always stepped in when there were many opinions in the group, summarizing the strengths of each person's ideas and helping us with problem solving. When some members couldn't keep up with the conversation, she provided clear explanations, which was a great help. When creating our lesson plan, she often asked, "Is this okay?" and shared knowledge she learned in the other classes. Because of her, I think we could think deeply about every aspect of our lesson plan. (Participant 3)
- (2) At various stages of lesson planning, she frequently posed deep questions like "Wouldn't it be better to do this differently here?" or "What do you mean by this?" As a result, meaningful discussions took place, and the flow and structure of our lesson underwent multiple changes. This ultimately provided a catalyst for addressing and clarifying many aspects of our lesson about which we felt uncertain. (Participant 7)
- (3) When creating our lesson plan, everyone repeatedly consolidated and reconstructed the ideas they each contributed. In the process of preparing for our teaching demonstration, she didn't express her preferences as much, but she was excellent at providing accurate judgments and suggestions in line with *The Course of Study*, pointing out what was wrong and right regarding our ideas. She was very helpful. (Participant 13)

This situation may be attributed to participants' understanding of the national curriculum guidelines, the importance of aligning evaluation methods with lesson content, and their desire to create innovative lessons. However, participants who excessively demanded logical reasoning and critical thinking skills from others received negative evaluations. The following excerpt indicates their evaluations.

- (4) During discussions on various matters, our group often felt tense, and the atmosphere was heavy. She is a strong-willed person who firmly stands by her opinions, so whenever a group member expressed his or her views, she rigorously questioned the basis, reasons behind them, and why he or she wanted to go in that direction. Of course, such discussions are important, but I strongly feel that it would have been better if we could exchange ideas more openly in our group and freely choose good ideas from them. (Participant 17)

Most such participants frequently played a leadership role in group discussions. They tended to prioritize logical and critical thinking to the extent that they did not consider others' opinions, which was, in turn, perceived as a lack of cooperativeness. This behavior was sometimes interpreted as intellectual arrogance or insensitivity to group dynamics. While their intentions might have been to enhance the quality of discussions, the imbalance between assertiveness and inclusiveness appeared to hinder open dialogue. In such cases, other group members often refrained from contributing, possibly fearing criticism or dismissal of their views.

- (5) She showed leadership in our group, and in that sense, I can say that her contribution was great. In terms of cooperativeness, it was good that she expressed her opinions based on what other members said. However, as for problem solving, I personally found it a bit lacking. It was good that she took the lead and thought through things, but I was a little surprised when differing opinions didn't seem to settle and when we needed to break apart something that we agreed on and redo it all over again. I expressed my opposition, but my opinion was not accepted. Teamwork is important, so we went with what she proposed as the center of our lesson plan. (Participant 1)

Excerpt (5) shows how one of the participants' experiences during the group work. The atmosphere created by an excessive emphasis on such higher-order thinking skills within the group was tense, suppressing members' active participation and being somewhat intimidating, particularly for participants who struggled to articulate complex and abstract ideas in the context of CLP. Thus, tension was observed between the participants' desire to listen attentively to and respect others' opinions and the demand for higher-order thinking skills within each group.

4.2.2 *Personal traits/factors and communication skills*

Introverted participants, particularly those who initially struggled to communicate with other group members, caused other members to experience concern or uneasiness regarding their collaborative and communication skills. However, nearly all participants prioritized process-

oriented evaluations. In addition, most introverted participants received high evaluations as they progressively provided more opinions and ideas throughout the 10-week CLP.

- (6) She engaged in attentive listening to others' opinions and showed understanding during discussions. She mentioned herself that she lacked confidence in her English skills, and she appeared to struggle a bit when it came to proposing teaching ideas. However, her attitude was not one of reluctance but rather a proactive effort to cover her weak points. She willingly engaged in tasks such as document preparation and typing handouts to compensate for her lack of confidence, which I consider to be important collaborative actions. (Participant 6)
- (7) There were times when he insisted on employing a grammar-translation approach or using more Japanese (as an instructional language), but he sincerely addressed his lack of study and personally discussed with me how he felt about the members' opinions. Concerning the content of the lesson in which we could enable students to think about various social issues, such as homeless people as a starting point, he himself initially showed lack of motivation and awareness regarding such issues and often turned away, saying "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." However, as we progressed with our group work, it seemed that something changed within him. He started sharing ideas in the group that were unique to him, such as "Wouldn't it be interesting to teach the class like this?" (Participant 10)

Interestingly, the efficiency of communication within each group was considered in relation to individual members' internal changes and growth. Evaluations were not determined solely on the basis of participants' initial impressions of their peers. However, they were assessed through a thorough observation of how individuals changed and grew throughout the process.

- (8) I felt that he showed a strong willingness to grow, and I really feel that he was the one who grew the most among the group members. He recognized the gap between his own abilities and those of other group members with regard to lesson planning, implementation, and English language proficiency. I think that this task (the CLP task) became a great opportunity to boost his future growth. His active participation was evident when discussing the lesson content and structure, and he displayed an attitude of tackling problems that emerged during the discussions. When we practiced together for our teaching demonstrations, he actively pointed out problems and issues and showed an attitude of striving to refine our teaching to a higher level. He gradually started collaborating with us more effectively, and he effectively integrated the ideas of others within the group with his own. Moreover, he provided many ideas for our lesson content and learning materials, so his contribution to our teaching demonstration was quite significant. (Participant 18)

All participants tended to highlight and evaluate internal factors relating to collaborative attitudes. These attitudes include consideration and kindness toward other group members. Aspects that are difficult to quantify, such as motivation, enthusiasm, a sense of responsibility, and personal traits, were emphasized, and participants' evaluations often included objective descriptions of peers' attitudes and a holistic perspective on the entire group dynamic.

- (9) At first, I had concerns that he appeared to be quiet and hesitant to speak up, but he actively participated in lesson planning and offered well-structured and clear ideas. Everyone paid attention to his opinions because what he said made sense to all of us. In addition, when we provided feedback on the draft of his lesson plan, he not only listened to our suggestions but also offered alternative solutions. This made me feel that he had excellent problem-solving skills. Even when he couldn't attend an online meeting due to illness, he not only took care of his responsibilities but also proposed corrections for other team members' parts. He clearly showed consideration for everyone, which made me feel that he was cooperative. (Participant 15)

Notably, peers' communication skills were evaluated in a process-oriented manner alongside the assessment of cooperative attitudes, motivation, enthusiasm, sincerity, sense of responsibility, and kindness toward others that participants observed in the context of CLP. Participants seemed to place more value on how their peers interacted with the group over time, such as their willingness to compromise, responsiveness during meetings, and efforts to support others. This suggests that participants viewed effective collaboration not simply as a final product but as an ongoing interpersonal process shaped by mutual respect, empathy, and sustained communicative engagement.

4.2.3 English language proficiency and CLP

In particular, participants with high English language proficiency were praised when they utilized their language skills to support other group members, for instance, by helping with pronunciation practice, correcting other members' grammatical mistakes and assisting in the improvement of English speech for the teaching demonstrations. Furthermore, when engaging in CLP, the participants with high English language proficiency tended to propose well-developed referential questions related to English texts that required logical reasoning. This observation can be attributed to their advanced reading comprehension skills. Their actions and behaviors in designing advanced communication tasks, preparing learning materials, and developing assessment methods that were suited to the lesson objectives were also evaluated highly.

- (10) In our group, she excelled in English language proficiency, especially in speaking ability. In our discussions regarding how to conduct our lesson in English, I felt that she played a leading role in advancing the conversation toward problem solving. Particularly during our group's teaching demonstration practice, she took on the role of correcting pronunciation and grammatical errors in other members' instructions. This significantly improved the overall quality of our group's teaching demonstration. (Participant 15)

These participants with high English language proficiency tended to play a leading role in the CLP task, quite often without sufficiently consulting other members; this tendency is possibly due to their individualistic perspectives. Interestingly, such a tendency is related to the formation of group members' first impressions regarding high-proficiency members. The following excerpts illustrate the fact that high English language proficiency became a focal point of evaluations alongside individualistic perspectives.

- (11) His contribution was highly valued, as he could teach more natural English expressions to use during the lesson. His emphasis on spontaneity also enriched the content of our teaching demonstration. When we created our lesson plan, this might have been related to his extensive knowledge, but there were times when we were not given enough time to scrutinize what he proposed, so I wished he had been more aware of the group dynamic. However, he didn't just assert his individual opinion and stick to it; he also listened to and incorporated the opinions of others regarding the proposals he made. This shows a collaborative attitude. (Participant 6)
- (12) Due to his native-level pronunciation and high English language proficiency, he was quick to help whenever there were things I didn't know. I received help from him numerous times, which ultimately led to timely problem solving. However, because he had such exceptional skills, I was concerned that he might end up dominating our group work. So, when I found myself in the same group, I honestly felt quite anxious about whether I could contribute effectively to this group. Such concerns were completely unfounded. He provided precise advice to me and the other members and worked collaboratively. His attitude inspired me to put in my best effort and do what I could. (Participant 7)
- (13) I didn't feel that his attitude was accepting of lesson ideas proposed by others. As a result, the discussions ultimately progressed in a way in which he, working alone, created the lesson plan, and the other members just modified the plan. However, it's not that there was no collaborative spirit at all; when it came to planning what to write on chalkboard, how to use it, and the specific progression of the lesson, he was able to engage in collaborative discussion with other members. (Participant 15)

Additionally, during teaching demonstrations, participants with high English language proficiency were assigned challenging lesson segments and received positive evaluations for their skillful performance on the day of the demonstration. The assignment of such demanding lesson roles appeared to reflect not only the group's reliance on their advanced English language skills but also their perceived competence in facilitating classroom activities. While their performance was often positively evaluated, these assignments sometimes led other members to regard them as *de facto* leaders within the group. This dynamic may have contributed to the perception that those with higher English language proficiency were naturally expected to take on leading roles, although collaborative efforts remained essential.

- (14) He played the role of the assistant language teacher Brian throughout the entire 50-minute lesson using his strong English skills. He provided clear advice to the students who couldn't keep up with the lesson and effectively

supported the other teacher role members in English during the lesson. This created an environment that felt like being in an actual educational setting due to his consistent use of English. (Participant 15)

Overall, the level of English language proficiency greatly influenced the dynamics in each group as well as the results of the peer assessment. It should be noted that high English language proficiency was not the sole criterion for evaluation. However, it was assessed in conjunction with other aspects, such as cognitive and collaborative skills and personal traits/factors.

5. DISCUSSION

Distinct patterns of word usage related to participants' sex and English language proficiency emerged in the evaluations. Participants with high English language proficiency appeared to be uncooperative to some group members. This finding implies that the presence of participants with high English language proficiency influenced the form and quality of collaboration in the context of the CLP task. Such findings highlight the need to consider group composition when conducting CLP in English teacher education programs. At the very least, a balanced group composition should be considered by examining the sex ratio and varying levels of English language proficiency within groups. Student teachers' personal traits or internal factors may also be considered to effectively implement CLP.

The data further revealed a prevalence of positive evaluations over negative evaluations, as well as a tendency toward process-oriented evaluations. These findings can be attributed to participants' sense of camaraderie, which the EFL teacher education program had hitherto fostered. Prior to enrolling in the most advanced EFL teaching methodology course and possibly during the CLP task, participants may have developed solidarity or mutual trust while taking teacher education courses together in pursuit of the common goal of preparing for the teaching practicum. Accordingly, the participants may have focused on their peers' strengths rather than critically assessing their weaknesses. This finding further implies that monitoring the level of solidarity and trust among student teachers is crucial for ensuring the effective implementation of peer assessment in the context of CLP.

With regard to peer assessment, it is generally recommended to develop and use rubrics that clearly outline specific criteria. Using rubrics can be effective when the objective is to assess and grade student teachers' performance for instructional purposes (Brookhart & Chen, 2015; Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Nordrum et al., 2013; Reddy & Andrade, 2010). However, if rubrics had been employed in this study, participants' focal points (i.e., evaluation criteria and outcomes) would have been excessively controlled; their autonomy with regard to determining which aspects of CLP to emphasize or prioritize and the reasons/justifications underlying their evaluations might thus have been obscured (Bailey, 2009; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). As this study shows, student teachers' standards for evaluating their peers are diverse and intricately intertwined. A format that allows student teachers to freely articulate their evaluations and justifications may be more effective than criterion-referenced peer assessment, particularly when the goal is to explore and investigate their perspectives for research purposes.

Regarding the feasibility of peer assessment, there is room for debate concerning whether the results of peer assessment should be reflected in the course grade (Li et al., 2021; Topping, 2003). Because student teachers are not yet full-fledged teachers, there may be concerns regarding the reliability and validity of their peers' assessment of them. When evaluating all student teachers' engagement in CLP, it may be highly challenging or even impossible for a teacher educator to closely examine each student teacher's performance while taking into account multiple factors. Research is currently underway to develop an instrument that holistically assesses teacher collaboration in the context of CLP based on the SECI (socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) knowledge-creation model (e.g., Mendoza et al., 2022). It may be appropriate for teacher educators to use methods that are specifically tailored to the evaluation of CLP. While teacher educators must remain mindful of the subjective nature

of peer assessment, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into student teachers' performance, providing a crucial source of evidence for informed evaluation and pedagogical decision-making.

6. CONCLUSION

Teacher collaboration is essential for enhancing the quality of education, particularly in the postmethod era where adaptability to context is vital (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). As Sánchez and Chapetón (2021) argue, effective teaching benefits from flexibility, creativity, and “professional artistry” (p. 6), viewing teaching as both an art and a craft (Freeman & Richards, 1993; Yen, 1991). This perspective reinforces the necessity of integrating theoretical knowledge with practical teaching skills, which can be cultivated through collaborative engagement in teacher education. Given the importance of collaboration in teacher preparation, this study investigated how CLP, integrated with peer assessment, can serve as a mechanism for fostering essential teaching competencies.

To explore the dynamics of CLP, this study incorporated peer assessment as a lens for examining student teachers' collaborative interactions and evaluative criteria. Nineteen student teachers participated in the study. Their written peer assessments were analyzed to achieve two main goals: (a) to identify the aspects of peers' work that were evaluated in the context of CLP and (b) to clarify the justifications provided for these evaluations. This analysis sheds light on the elements that participants prioritized when reflecting on effective collaboration in the prelesson stage. Findings indicate that participants used diverse criteria to evaluate their peers, including English language proficiency, cognitive skills, cooperativeness, and personality. In particular, logical reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, and attentiveness to others, along with an openness to growth and change, were emphasized. Some participants with high English language proficiency took on leadership roles; however, their assertiveness was occasionally perceived as limiting group cohesion. These findings highlight the importance of group composition in implementing CLP in teacher education programs. A balanced group composition that considers not only English language proficiency but also personality and cooperativeness is likely to lead to more effective CLP implementation. Furthermore, open-ended peer assessments proved to be an effective means of revealing the various perspectives that participants held on the nature of collaboration in general and CLP in particular.

Because this qualitative study focused on a limited sample of Japanese student teachers, however, its findings may not be broadly generalizable. Participants' cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds might have shaped their conceptualizations of collaboration and their peer assessment criteria. In addition, as the study was conducted in the context of an EFL teacher education program at a single university, its applicability across different educational settings remains uncertain. Future research involving student teachers from diverse linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts could further refine our understanding of effective CLP implementation in global teacher education. Despite these limitations, this study offers valuable insights for teacher educators, providing practical approaches for integrating CLP and peer assessment to foster student teachers' collaboration skills and sense of agency.

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