

Enhancing the Learning Process Through Group Dynamics

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Abstract

The atmosphere in the classroom plays a pivotal role in the success or failure of language learning. Although group work and interaction are fundamental elements to most language teaching approaches, group dynamics, with its roots based in psychology, is frequently overlooked in course preparation (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). Group work and interaction are successful when students have support and cooperation between members (Hadfield, 1992). While positive group dynamics can lift the language development of an entire class, negative group dynamics can become an obstacle. Most teachers have experienced situations in the classroom where an activity or a lesson fails to accomplish its intended results due to a lack of student enthusiasm or participation. As Stevick (1980) once noted, “success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (p. 4). Therefore, creating a comfortable, positive environment through group dynamics should be at the foundation of any language course. This paper explores how two teachers have helped build positive group dynamics within their university language classrooms.

Introduction

Every teacher can tell you about things “going wrong” in the classroom, where even the most meticulously planned lesson—peer interaction, discussion questions, engaging activities, etc.—is met with silence and takes the air out of, not only the teacher, but the entire classroom. Likewise, teachers can also tell you when “everything clicked” and the enthusiasm and eagerness of the students reminded them of why they wanted to become teachers in the first place. What accounts for the differences between the two experiences? What can we do to experience the “fun” classroom all the time? How can we make our classroom both engaging and educational at the same time?

This paper examines how constructing positive group dynamics can create a classroom atmosphere that is regularly rewarding for students and teachers alike. As L2 instructors, we try to create student-centered lessons that include, skill development, pace, variety, activities, and competencies (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). However, that can be immaterial if the environment in the classroom is disinclined and unengaged. While we, as teachers, continuously think of innovative ways to get our students more active in the classroom, sometimes it’s the simple things which have the biggest impact. Underhill (1999) stated that “new techniques with old attitudes may amount to no change, while new attitudes even with old techniques can lead to significant change” (p. 131). Minor adjustments in a teacher’s approach to the classroom environment can prove to be beneficial. A focus on group dynamics in the classroom can help establish a positive environment that can make the learning process a more rewarding experience.

The Language Classroom

Student Attitudes. Every April, at the beginning of the academic year, students nervously enter the classroom and look at the students they will be studying with for the next few months. While it is natural for people to have tension, anxiety, uncertainty, and a lack of confidence when meeting new people

(McCollom, 1990), this can be especially true for language learners where there are additional feelings of uncertainty about their own competence, anxiety about using English, and nervousness about not understanding or comprehending what needs to be done (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). All these things must be taken into consideration by the teacher before the first class has even begun.

Before the teacher has entered the room, students have already begun forming opinions of their peers. This happens naturally as people can form first impressions based on such factors as nonverbal communication and body language (Dury et al., 2009). Shaw (1981) explains that there is an initial interpersonal attraction based on physical attractiveness, the perceived ability of others, and the perceived similarity in attitudes and personality. However, while opinions have already developed by students, a key component of group dynamics is that groups can still develop cohesiveness despite initial member's likes and dislikes (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Rogers, 1970). As a result, the teacher plays a substantial role in establishing the group dynamics within the classroom.

Role of the Teacher. Teachers inherently fill the leadership role in the classroom. To determine the role of the teacher in group dynamics, it is important to consider different types of leadership. Along with his colleagues, social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who coined the term “group dynamics,” studied how children react under three different types of leadership: autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, and a laissez-faire leadership (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). They found that while autocratic groups, where the teacher made all the decisions without considering the input of others, spent more time on work, the quality of work was better in democratic groups, and a laissez-faire type of leadership produced the most stress, frustration, and unproductiveness (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Studies replicating Lewin's work have produced similar results which support a democratic type of leadership where many people are involved in the decision-making process. As with most student-centered class-

rooms, this places the teacher in the role of a facilitator.

The concept of the teacher as a facilitator is growing increasingly common throughout EFL classrooms. With its roots in group psychotherapy, the role of the teacher as a facilitator “highlights the importance of the learner in the learning process, while restricting the teacher’s role to providing an appropriate climate and resources to support learning” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 92). To do this, a facilitator should have the characteristics of empathy, acceptance, and congruence (Rogers, 1983). While showing empathy and acceptance are characteristics that most teachers can agree on as being essential in establishing a positive classroom environment, the concept of congruence can be challenging. Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) describe congruence as the teacher appearing “as a human being and not as an embodiment of authoritative statuses and ready-made roles” (p. 76). In other words, to be congruent, teachers should be authentic in their behavior and relatable to their students. This can be accomplished by teachers not hesitating to admit uncertainty and willingly share some of their own experiences with their students. By doing these types of things, it becomes easier for a teacher to move into the role of a facilitator. Examples of how this can be accomplished are discussed later in the paper.

This brings us back to defining the role of the teacher in group dynamics. The answer is that the teacher’s role evolves from Lewin’s autocratic style of leadership at the beginning of a course to a facilitator by the end of it. When a course first begins, an autocratic approach, with the teacher as the decision-maker, is favored, as it results in order and productivity in the classroom (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). However, for the group to continue to grow, the teacher should adopt a more democratic approach as time goes by and eventually fall into the role of a facilitator since the primary role of a facilitator in group dynamics is “managing emotional states- encouraging positive ones and finding ways to overcome the negative ones and, ideally, utilizing both for growth” (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 21). For this process to occur, it is essential to understand the

principles of group dynamics.

Group Dynamics

Background. Lewin coined the term “group dynamics” in the 1940s and created the Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1945 to study how people and groups react to the positive and negative situations surrounding them (Lewin, 1945). In the 1950s and 1960s, there was rapid growth in the discipline of group dynamics as it became more interdisciplinary, following numerous studies by theorists and researchers (Forsyth, 2014). Group dynamics overlaps the domains of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and social work (Dörnyei & Maldrez, 1997) while focusing on relationships between people.

Group dynamics can be defined as “the influential actions, processes, and changes that occur within and between groups” (Forsyth, 2014, p. 1). Though the study of group dynamics is over 70 years old and is widely applied to many different fields, it has remained a relatively minor research topic in second language (L2) research. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) claimed that “group dynamics is probably one of the most—if not *the* most—useful subdisciplines in the social sciences for language teachers” (p. 1). Despite this assertion, there are still only a limited number of studies in L2 learning.

Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) conducted one of the first studies of group dynamics in a language classroom by studying how motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence were affected by cohesion. The study found a correlation between the student’s perception of strong class cohesion and a positive learning environment. In studying Hungarian high school students learning English, the study found that a “good classroom atmosphere promotes student involvement and activity while moderating anxiety and promoting self-confidence” (p. 442).

Though his research focused on critical collaborative autonomy (CCA), Murphey’s (2001) study at a Japanese university also showed the benefits of

establishing positive group dynamics. Although it seems contradictory to be both collaborative and autonomous, Murphey explained that “the concepts actually go hand in hand. The more that people interact and collaborate, the more choices they become aware of and the more autonomously they can act” (p. 136). Positive group dynamics were achieved through promoting socialization by “regularly changing seat partners, varying partners for the recorded conversations, and providing socializing activities” (p. 139). These activities enabled students to feel comfortable with each other and create a positive environment where collaboration led to the development of student autonomy.

In teaching nursing students, Matsumoto (2010) found that her students overcame their negative English learning experiences in high school to become more willing English speakers due to the development of a positive, interactive learning environment. After learning in teacher-centered high school English classes which used the *Yakudoku* or Grammar-Translation method, and had little to no interaction, students were more inclined to use English as they became comfortable in the classroom environment. The study found that positive group dynamics, which were built on the student’s positive intermember relations, encouraged them to become “speakers and not recipients, able to communicate what they wanted to say in English” (p. 181).

While these studies demonstrate some of the benefits that group dynamics can bring to language learners there are also barriers which can hinder group dynamics, particularly in Japan.

Obstacles in Japan. In another study, Matsumoto (2008) found that some of the obstacles to group dynamics in Japanese high school English classes include a lack of speaking opportunities, the culture of learning, and a failure in teacher leadership. These are some of the experiences students bring into the university classroom that can negatively affect group dynamics and impact the learning process.

Many of the problems in Japanese high schools, particularly the focus on

university entrance examinations and the lack of speaking opportunities, have been addressed in numerous studies (Guest, 2000; Harumi, 2011; Matsumoto, 2003; Matsumoto, 2008; Ozasa, 2001; Sato, 2004). McVeigh (2002), as shown in Table 1, provides a list of the differences between what English learners in Japan feel is “Japan-Appropriated English” and “Fantasy English.” This pinpoints many of the problems that teachers face in university classes when attempting to make their classes more communicative. Though “fantasy English” is a bit of a misnomer, McVeigh’s list illustrates the stark differences between how English is taught and how English, from a university teacher’s perspective, should be used. While high school English classes tend to focus on “Japan-Appropriated English,” university English classes place an emphasis on “Fantasy English.”

Table 1

Japan-Appropriated English and Fantasy English Compared

Japan-Appropriated English	Fantasy English
Purpose	Purpose
<i>Eigo</i> : To pass exams In-group language Memorization training Passing tests in Japan Being a good student	<i>Eikaiwa</i> : For communication Out-group language Interaction with foreign Other Vacations/travel in foreign lands Becoming “Internationalized”
Associated Learning Practice	Associated Learning Practice
Cramming Grammar-translation (<i>yakudoku</i>) Studying Reading/writing Classrooms and cram schools Japanese (or <i>katakana</i> -ized) English	Learning Communicative approach Conversation Speaking/listening Commercial English schools Using “native” English
Associated Meanings	Associated Meanings
Teachers/authority figures Japaneseness Japan Japanese culture “Traditional” Japanese culture Past Tensions of exam preparation Control Hierarchy Politeness Circumlocution/indirectness Self-monitoring Conformity	<i>Gaijin</i> /playful Other “Internationalism” Other countries Foreign culture “Modern” Japanese culture Modernity Relaxation of overseas travel Freedom Equality Frankness Straightforward/directness Expressing oneself Independence

Note. Reprinted from *Japanese Higher Education as Myth* (p. 168) by McVeigh, 2002, M.E. Sharpe. Copyright 2002 by Brian McVeigh.

Schmuck and Schmuck (2008) pointed out that the way of studying in high school classes has produced students who have “learned to work quietly alone and speak respectfully to adults, but they had not learned how to work effectively

in small groups. They had worked hard through competition, but they had not learned how to cooperate” (p. 236). Therefore, in terms of group dynamics within the university classroom, high school classes have developed an individualistic culture among students as a hindrance to group dynamics. With so much effort focused on taking entrance examinations, clearly an individual activity, many students are not accustomed to learning in the type of cooperative environment needed to establish positive group dynamics.

Matsumoto (2008) observed university classrooms in Japan where she encountered leadership styles that were autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. In the study, she found that, regardless of their leadership style, the teachers, to varying degrees, didn't provide the proper atmosphere for interaction to take place. Edge (1993) defined the five types of interaction that occurs in the language classroom: 1) the teacher giving instructions to the class; 2) the teacher giving instructions to an individual; 3) the teacher engaging in a conversation with the class; 4) the teacher telling students to talk to each other; 5) the students talking directly to each other (p. 69). While the autocratic teachers in her study leaned heavily on the first two types, and the democratic and laissez-faire type of leaders allowed for more dialogue between students, none of the teachers interacted enough with the students nor encouraged more interaction amongst themselves (Matsumoto, 2008). As noted earlier, it is important that the teacher continue to develop as a leader throughout the length of a course. In Matsumoto's study, none of this development occurred as the teachers remained fixed in their leadership style. When transitioning from an autocratic leader at the start of a course to a democratic one towards the middle and eventually moving into a facilitator role, all types of interaction are necessary in a language classroom. It is up to the teacher, naturally set up as the leader in the classroom, to overcome the obstacles that Japanese students bring into the classroom to establish positive group dynamics.

Group Dynamics in University Classrooms

Overview

Group dynamics can be “extremely significant in determining the success or failure of a learning experience” (Arnold & Brown, 1999, pp. 20–21). The two authors of this paper place an emphasis on establishing positive group dynamics in all their university classes. We believe that group dynamics are the basis of successful language classes. Following Dörnyei and Murphey’s (2003) statement, “Learning about group dynamics and organizing well-functioning groups will go a long way toward facilitating smooth classroom management and enhancing performance” (p. 11). The rest of the article focuses on some of the things that we do to establish positive group dynamics. While some are specific activities to build group dynamics, you will see that much of what we discuss are things that go back to Stevick’s (1980) quote that “success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (p. 4). While the ideas are from Dörnyei and Malderez (1997), the application of them is the result of the two author’s experiences. For the purpose of this paper, the term “group” refers to all of the students in the class rather than the groups that students are put into when doing group work.

The two authors decided to write this paper due to their shared experience in observing the positive transformation of a classroom through a shift in group dynamics. We were responsible for taking over a course during the fall semester. The course met twice a week, with both of us taking one day each. The classroom that we walked into had students who were unenthusiastic about the course, unmotivated to use English, and generally a bunch of individuals forced to be in the same classroom together. It was not an enjoyable environment to teach. By using many of the ideas and activities below, it was amazing to see the group, which had already been together for the first four months of the spring semester, open up, both with each other and the two of us, as the learning environment

became collaborative. Students began to become more active speakers rather than just language recipients. By the end of the semester, the growth of the students had completely transformed the classroom from one that started as the low point of our teaching week to one that we were sad to say goodbye to.

Group Dynamics in Eric's Classrooms

Icebreakers. While I'm sure we all use icebreakers in the first lesson of a course so students can get to know each other, it is important to not limit them to the first lesson. It takes time to get to know someone and with most classes meeting only once or twice a week, it is essential to give students the chance to learn about each other, particularly in the beginning of a course when student anxiety about their classmates and language skills are high. Giving students time to chat with each other, outside of just coursework, is an important step towards building relationships. "When people are linked by a relationship, they become interdependent, for they can influence one another's thoughts, actions, emotions, and outcomes" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 5)

On the first day of class, I usually spend half the class, 45 minutes, on icebreakers, particularly with first year students, most of whom don't know anyone else in the class. After giving each student a Venn diagram with two circles, I give them about five minutes to list as many things as they can about themselves in the left circle. After five minutes, I put the students in pairs and have them exchange their Venn diagrams. The students copy their list from the left circle of their own Venn Diagram onto the right circle of their partner's diagram. They have five to ten minutes to ask each other what the information means. So, for example, if person A has written, "Gifu," then person B can ask, "Why did you write Gifu?" or "What does Gifu mean?" To help students come up with questions, it is better to write some examples on the board.

As with any activity that is mentioned in this article, it is useful to have students model the activity in front of the class before letting the students do

the task. This is especially important in the early days of a class, particularly with first year students, where some students may need time to adjust to your pronunciation and way of speaking. When students model dialog, the other students tend to listen to them more carefully because student pronunciation is generally easier to understand than that of a native speaker (Matsumoto, 2008).

As students begin the activity, I walk around and monitor the conversations. Since it is the first class, I don't jump into their conversations at this point, because I think it's important for the students to practice their English with each other. Once that is done, I explain to them that where the two circles overlap is where they need to write down the things that they have in common with each other, which they can discover by asking each other questions. It is useful for students to find things that they have in common because "when the ties linking members are strong, the group is more enduring and its influence on members is more extensive" (Forsyth, 2014, p. 5). To further strengthen the ties, it can be useful to combine the pairs into groups of four and have them struggle to find similarities in which all four of them share. The experience always enables the students to find out a lot about each other.

This activity can be repeated during the first few weeks, but with a much narrower focus. A topic can be set such as travel, food, or Japan, where students can only talk about things related to the topic. Usually in the second or third week, I begin to join the pairs so that ties can start being made between myself and the students.

Integrate Yourself. Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) encourage us, as teachers, to participate in the activities with students as often as you can to not only "enhance your integration into the group, but what you learn about students and about their language will also provide you with a rich source of ideas for future lesson planning" (p. 78). The only way you can get to know your students and vice versa, is to talk with them. The more you talk with them, the more approachable you become. While this is always easier in theory than it is in practice, what

are some ways that you can do this without seeming too intrusive?

I have used class reflection sheets for years and have found them to be an invaluable way of getting to know my students. I began to use them when I had classes of over 30 students and realized that it was impossible to find time to really get to know most of the students. Before the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes online, I used the last five minutes of every class to let students write down whatever they wanted to about the class. When they were done, they submitted them to me and before the next class, I would read them, and write my own comments back to the students. I am always happy to see what students have written and enjoy seeing students react to how I have responded to their comments. At the end of every school year, I always give the students the reflection sheets to keep and am pleased when students came back from study abroad programs and say that they not only brought their reflection sheets with them while abroad but also read them to cheer up when they felt homesick or nervous about their language ability.

When classes went online, I started using Google Drive for the reflection sheets and they became an even greater source of communication between the students and myself. Because students can type their comments anytime during the week before the next class and are not limited to a five-minute window, many of the students take the time to express their thoughts in detail. In addition to the wonderful practice of expressing themselves in English, the reflection sheets enabled me to get to know my students better. While some students limited their comments to what they thought of the day's lesson, which, for me, was valuable feedback on my lesson, other students discussed what they had done on the weekend, asked questions to get to know me better, started discussion threads in which we would ask each other questions over the course of a few weeks, shared their thoughts on classmates, and many other things which I wouldn't have known about without the reflection sheets.

When we returned to campus for lessons, and I was meeting many of the

students face to face for the first time, the reflection sheets made me feel like I already knew them well and, I believe, helped reduce some of the anxiety about the transition from online classes back to face to face classes for both the students and myself. At the end of the school year, several students commented, on their reflection sheet, that typing their comments every week was their favorite homework to do, which made me happy, but also sad that they viewed the reflection sheets as homework!

Be Congruent. As mentioned earlier, being congruent is one way for a teacher to move into a facilitating role rather than stay in a leadership role. While integrating yourself goes a long way towards achieving this, there are other ways to do this as well. To be clear, being congruent doesn't mean that you need to become friends with your students but rather, make it so that students see you as being approachable. A teacher who is autocratic will never have congruence since autocratic teachers inhibit student-student interaction and student-teacher interaction (Matsumoto, 2008). Without these interactions, it is impossible to have positive group dynamics in your classroom.

In my classrooms, I try to share my experiences with my students as often as I can. We were all university students at some point in our lives and we can relate to many of the experiences our students are going through. I often share my experience, especially with first year students, about how miserable I was during my first year at university. It was my first time living away from home and it took me a while before I met the people who would eventually become my best friends. I tell my students to enjoy their university experiences because once you graduate, you no longer have the nice, long, summer and spring vacation that students enjoy. Of course, every time I say that, a student or two will point out that I still have those benefits in my job. At that point, I usually laugh, and don't tell them that my "break" is actually quite busy with research papers such as this one!

Anyone who is a native English speaker teaching in Japan can use their own

language experiences to show congruency with their students. As language learners ourselves, we should be able to tell students what we do to learn Japanese, or English, as well as share some of our own failures in learning the language. In fact, the students always enjoy listening to my failures in Japanese much more than they do my successes! By sharing these experiences, particularly the failures, we switch roles with our students because, although we are retelling our stories in English, our mistakes in their language probably mirror some of their own in English. English teachers who are not native speakers, such as Toshio, should definitely share their own struggles and achievements as English learners. They are great examples to the students as people who were once in their position of being in a classroom and studying English but became so skilled in English that they are now standing in the front of the classroom as the class facilitator.

Eric's Thoughts on Group Dynamics. Senior (2002) summarized language learning in a way that summarizes my own beliefs by saying, "I suggest that language learning is, by its very nature, a collective endeavor, and that learning takes place most effectively when language classes pull together as unified groups" (p. 402). Group dynamics is both an easy and difficult concept for language classes. As teachers, we know that classes run better when everyone gets along and the learning environment is good. The way we create that environment and feeling in the class is the part that is difficult to navigate. I believe that when there are positive group dynamics in a classroom, there is no ceiling to what students are capable of and willing to learn. While it is important to continue to grow our skills as teachers and continue to read, research, and talk about how to get the most out of our students and our lessons, it's equally important to remember that it's not always about reinventing the wheel as much as it is investing in people and relationships.

Group Dynamics in Toshio's Classrooms

Overview. When I took over the classes from another teacher, the class mood

was notably rough and unfriendly as if there was no harmony amongst students. Therefore, the group activities did not seem enjoyable as students did not learn, laugh together or compete with each other. The class needed to be refurbished and reinstructed in order to make a better learning environment. As previously noted, Stevick (1980) pointed out that the success of a class depends on what goes on amongst people in the classroom, and I consider managing individual students' deeds is as important as doing so as a whole class.

Random Group Making. I use UNO cards to create four to five random groups of students. UNO cards are convenient for ESL class activities because they come in four colours and nine numbers. To make four groups of four students, the teacher needs to provide five cards in any number of four different colours: four reds, four yellows, four blue and four greens. This easily shuffles students into random small groups. It is also simple to give a special role to an individual student in the group by placing a number, such as a card number 1 to be a presenter and card number 2 to hold a poster. Making new groups can be easy as well by trading red 1 and blue 1 for example.

As Dornyei & Malderez (1997) emphasise, avoiding fixed seating patterns, randomness is necessary for students to sit and interact with as many different other students as possible. With UNO cards, students are numbered and coloured and thus without personal bias they can be shuffled many times randomly.

Purpose of Basic Speaking Activities. When a classroom is a place filled with plenty of strangers, students do not feel comfortable enough to talk, especially in their second language. To break this thick ice shield, I usually assign them plenty of speaking activities. The purpose of speaking activities is to get to know each other: who they are, where they come from, what they do, why they are here and what they like to do. It is simple, but knowing those basic facts of their peers is the most obvious way of making a stranger a real classmate.

Speaking activities for this specific purpose should be targeting topics about themselves. Starting with their name is important because remembering names

is always a great start of shifting from nobody to somebody. Basic topics can be hometown, hobby, sports, food, special skills, and travel. Questions can ask about their favourite restaurant/cafe, whether they can cook, whether they have been overseas, their favourite sports, if they play sports, where they grew up, stories about their hometown, their favorite food, what are their special skills.

This is a fundamental setting for upcoming classroom management and by knowing each other, students work together so much better in a classroom. This can help avoid awkward silence in the classroom and can also encourage students' more proactive participation in class activities and discussions.

ESL Games For Group Dynamics. While the above speaking activities are for building a fundamental setting, ESL games can play the role of an ice breaker after they get to know each other a little. Playing games with strangers can be awkward, but after the introductory conversation activities stated above, students may play games without extreme tension.

For Japanese students, Shiritori can be quite easy to play as they are usually familiar with the rules in the Japanese version. This is a word game where participants say one word in turn. The word they choose must start with the letter of the alphabet the previous speaker's word ended with. The games plays as; apple – egg – goose – entertainment – tiger – rock – kind – drums – speedy – year. This game is endless unless the teacher adds a rule of “the word that ends with n loses”. This game can be an effective practice of using as much vocabulary as they know.

Shopping-game is another effective word game for bonding students in groups while learning. The teacher sets a kind of shop, such as a vegetable shop, fruit shop, supermarket, or home center, and players say the name of the item they buy in the shop. All players must use the appointed sentence: “I went to the xxxx shop (e.g. vegetable shop) and I bought yyyy (the name of the item - e.g. an orange). The following players must add an item in the same sentence. They must care about using articles and numbers to make sure the number of the items;

an apple, three carrots. The list of items develops and gets longer, and thus it is a challenge of memory of vocabulary. This game can be played by competing in each group.

ESL games can play an effective role in getting students together and bonding within the teams. Dornyei and Malderez (1997) suggest that including small group fun competitions in the classes can be an effective learning process. By setting an inter-team competition, team members can enjoy the togetherness of the team and develop a positive team mentality. Preparing some prizes such as small chocolate or a lolly can excite students to play the games even more.

Positive Feedback. I always encourage my students and give positive comments on their effort no matter how small their achievements. A correction would be added to the positive comments but without embarrassing them. As I remember when I learned English in Japanese junior high school, it was all about correcting grammar, which made me feel wrong and gave negative emotions to the learning environment.

For speaking activities, giving a positive comment and advice directly and instantly can be appreciated. For this, teachers must observe students' speaking activities and conversations closely, focusing on the contents, the use of vocabulary as well as pronunciation. I give extra care in choosing words when giving advice as mildly as possible so as not to make them lose confidence since the purpose of my role is the absolute opposite to give them more confidence.

The contents of a students' work should be focused more than grammatical correction. For example, when they talk about a local festival in their hometown, I gather as much knowledge about the festival or the town as possible in my head and join the conversation by asking a few additional questions and comments about the festival and the town. This can make the conversation roll longer and deeper, and thus be an example of making a more complete conversation model. I always try to find their positive achievement, then if they seem to have enough motivation, I give additional advice on their pronunciation and recommend the

use of new vocabulary by giving examples.

Students may act shy at the beginning when the teacher joins their conversations and games, but it is important to have direct interaction with students, and eventually this is the most effective way to build a positive relationship between the teacher and students.

Invite Dialogue. ESL classes should be personal rather than a passive traditional lecture style. The Japanese school environment is still practising the pre-modern style. The traditional classroom environment sets the hierarchy where the teacher is constantly at the blackboard in front of the students, giving them knowledge, rules, techniques and meanings (Freire, 1996). In traditional class dynamics, teachers do not join students' activities or make direct interactions. Often in schools in Japan, teachers are much more respected in the traditional way and thus the classroom dynamics are rather oppressed by the authority. In other words, personalised communication between the teacher and students rarely happens.

Postmodern classrooms should, avoid authoritarian teacher-pupil models, develop an awareness of self, not being a controlled object of the oppressors (Freire, 1996). Freed from hierarchy, teachers should not always stay in front of the classroom but should walk around students, sit down with them, and join their group activities. By sitting within a group and joining group activities, the teacher is at a personal distance and personal communication can be made. Within the close personal distance, the teacher is a lot more accessible to students. Accessibility is a key to inviting dialogue, and according to Freire (1996), dialogue is the essence of education as the practice of freedom, and awakening of critical consciousness.

Where students have friendly access to the teacher, dialogue happens with the teacher and amongst students, and that is real communication, academically awakening their critical awareness. By looking at the class contents and activities from the student's point of view, at least showing the effort of doing so, the

teacher can achieve one step forward toward personalised classroom dynamics.

Understanding Learners' Background. Students secretly wish to be proactive learners and dream of becoming good English speakers. It appears to be peculiar because they are all ESL learners and they came to school to learn English. However, it does not mean they can all be proactive and enterprising. In the Japanese school education context, students have usually been oppressed and therefore often act shy, extremely introverted or at least passive. They become well-trained personnel on how to behave in the classroom. They were always asked to seek the correct answers, and correct answers only. Therefore they are not used to making a mistake and feel extremely ashamed to make one in front of pupils.

For speaking practice, a communicative approach can certainly be effective and the lesson should be managed only and all in English throughout the duration of class time, in theory. However, for the majority of the Japanese ESL learners who have just joined tertiary institutions, dealing with the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking all in English is a considerable surprise. In Japan, secondary education does not focus on communication. The teachers must understand this background where their quiet frame of mind comes from and why the classroom sometimes does not respond to the teacher's questions.

In the environment of "you must speak and speak only English", beginner learners are often overwhelmed and seek extra assistance from the classroom manager - the teacher. In this new learning environment, the teacher needs to put exceptional effort into setting up the evaluation criteria, where much more participation is counted and valued, and correct answers are not prioritised in this classroom, but rather learners' opinions and motivation is important. It should take a few weeks to a month for students to finally get used to the new evaluation criteria.

After understanding the importance of participation, while many show their effort of speaking in English amongst the group, some students find it extremely

difficult to do so. At this stage, instead of group discussion, paired work is more encouraging for everyone to speak in a conversation. Lining up desks in the middle of the classroom, assigning students to sit on both sides of those desks, facing each other, making a conversation for a short period of time, on a topic given by the teacher, and rotating a partner - this conversation exercise, speed dating, is an effective practice for students to speak in English on various given topics with multiple partners by rotation.

An active speaker may appear in speaking activities. There can be a notable gap between active and non-active speakers. The teacher must understand that the gap is not only caused by their English-speaking ability but also their output language motivation. Energetic and positive students may speak regardless of their English proficiency, and on the other hand, paper exam experts can be shy at speaking activities.

Have Fun. The Japanese school environment is serious compared to Australia, as I experienced teaching and learning in both environments. In Australian schools, tables and chairs are movable and wallpapers are colourful, and language is often taught by friendly/communicative approaches. On the other hand, Japanese schools offer language classes with 30 - 35 students, is textbook centered, and has passive learning styles, without much opportunity of playing games or conversation activities. In addition, as McVeigh (2002) argues that English language learning in Japan heavily focuses on entrance exams, the assignments are paper based exams and vocabulary quizzes.

Hosting a class party is absolutely an effective way of making a positive impact on the group dynamics of ESL classrooms. As previously mentioned, the Japanese classroom is not seeking fun but being under the heavy pressure of exams. Therefore, having a class party is a unique and stand-out experience for students. In addition, a class party is a branding process. An experience of having a class party is so unusual that it earns students' excitement and the course would gain a special brand.

Importantly, a class party can be the opportunity for the students to be classmates to each other. For a class party, I would usually give them a task of bringing one plan of their own; card game, snacks, topic of talk. Sometimes each group brings their own snacks to share with the whole class, sometimes the entire class works together to make a small cake in the classroom, sometimes the class makes their own photo slides and exhibits on the main screen of the classroom. A class party functions developing students' autonomy and thus develops an opportunity of uniting a class.

Treating Students Fairly Not Equally. Teachers must be aware of the importance of dealing with students fairly, not equally. Treating students fairly is fundamentally different from treating them equally. For example, if there was a blind student in class, equally giving everyone a paper-based textbook is not fair for her/him as she/he cannot read it. Instead, providing a computer-based verbally instructed e-textbook and allowing her/him to use it in his/her computer is a fair treatment. Giving special care or an additional tool sometimes is considered inequality, but that is exactly what is needed for fair classroom management.

Some can understand the topic in depth by verbal explanation, while others prefer doing the same by reading. Some take twice as long to understand, while others need five times as long. Learning styles and methods may vary from comprehending the phenomenon clearly by looking at the PowerPoint presentation to taking group discussion. If there are 10 different learners, there should be 10 different learning styles (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler 2000). Some learn best from the textbook, some from playing the games. Teachers must accept the fact that there are many different students with various backgrounds, and prepare different ways of teaching in order to meet the needs of fair classroom management.

Toshio's Thoughts on Group Dynamics. Dörnyei & Malderez (1997) state "the relative status of group members influence the amount and quality of communication the initiate or receive from others: in general, more communication

is both initiated and received by high status than by low status people, and the content of such messages tend to be more positive than messages directed down words in the status hierarchy” (p. 72). Changing the members can re-establish the hierarchy in the group and thus groups often change their members.

Considering a class as a group, there are highly motivated students and obviously low motivated students co-existing. Neither of them can be exchanged with other students from a different class. However, regularly shaping a new group within the class, students are always facing and integrating new members without establishing concrete characteristics and thus hierarchy in the group.

I seek group dynamics not only in the small groups within the class but as a whole class. The fair and active group dynamic can be sought by the ceaseless effort of classroom management by the teachers’ act. However, teachers’ management must always have a close focus on students’ point of view.

Conclusion

As language educators, we are well aware that language is a fundamental tool of human communication and thus interaction. Without others, one would have a hard time learning a language or even to find a necessity for it. Merely focusing on this point, it is clear enough that a group of people are needed and can help each other for language learning. However, from a psychological and social point of view, the needs of a group are even more than communication. As Forsyth (2014) suggests, “groups are not simply performance engines, for much of what happens in a group is relationship interaction (or socioemotional interaction). If group members falter and need support, others will buoy them up with kind words, suggestions, and other forms of help” (p. 8). Therefore, learning with and in a group is a fundamental essence of language learning.

As a conclusion, to respond to our challenging question addressed in the beginning of this paper, of what makes a classroom where “everything clicks” are; 1. The teacher’s role in establishing positive group dynamics, 2. The teach-

ers' ability to highlight the importance of the students in the learning process, while limiting the teacher's role to providing resources to support learning, 3. Understanding learners' specific backgrounds of past educational experiences, which can be significantly different from teacher's own, 4. To understand and accept that if there are 10 different learners there should be 10 different learning styles, and 5. Care for each and every learner as much as possible. While the case of creating positive group dynamics that this paper argues for cannot cover all the unique cases and circumstances, we hope teachers will have new attitudes for making brighter account of L2 education.

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