

## **Our Shared Experience in Group Dynamics**

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### **Abstract**

In the previous volume of this Bulletin, the two authors discussed the importance of group dynamics and some of the methods and activities that they've used to achieve positive group dynamics in their university classrooms (Hirata & Asai, 2022). This follow-up article describes a shared experience by the authors where a shift in group dynamics played a vital role in improving the classroom environment. Over the course of one semester, student attitude and the willingness to learn shifted from mostly negative and quiet to enthusiastic and lively. This article details how the two authors experienced the positive transformation as well as their own reflections on how it has helped shape their beliefs and approaches to language teaching.

### **Introduction**

In a previous paper (Hirata & Asai, 2022), the two authors examined the importance of teachers building positive group dynamics within their university language classrooms. Both authors believe “success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between

the people in the classroom” (Stevick, 1980, p. 4) by placing an emphasis on student motivation and group relationships within the classroom. However, while motivation, techniques, and linguistic abilities are significant factors in the classroom, every teacher has experienced a class where even the best-planned activity is unenthusiastically completed. While a negative class mood does not mean that the individual members are unskilled, good group dynamics can enhance learning while poor dynamics can hinder it (Arnold & Brown, 1999). This is because a group is a “resource pool that is greater in any given area than the resources possessed by any single member” (Douglas, 1983, p. 189). Therefore, it is vital to take advantage of this by getting students to work together in the classroom. Otherwise, it can be a tremendous waste of the resource pool.

While the purpose of our earlier paper was to describe the importance of group dynamics and explain different things the authors do to foster positive group dynamics, this paper reveals the details of our struggles, challenges, and eventual positive outcome: a successful model. The basis of the previous paper came from the authors’ “shared experience in observing the positive transformation of a classroom through a shift in group dynamics” (Hirata & Asai, 2022, p. 252). This paper is our reflection on that experience.

## **Background**

Core English is a required course for all first-year students in the School of Foreign Studies. At the time of the class we are writing about, this included the Department of British and American Studies, Department of French Studies, Department of Chinese Studies, Department of Japanese Studies, and the Department of World Liberal Arts. Core English classes meet twice a week, with a total of 30 classes in a semester. Core English is a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) based class with the textbook including units on living overseas, Japanese culture, marriage and relationships, and advertising (Bradley, Marceau, & Hirata, 2018). Each unit is a cycle of six classes, starting

with an introduction to the topic of the unit in the first class and culminating in a six-minute conversation about the contents of the unit in the sixth class. There are four units in a semester, so this cycle repeats itself four times and constitutes 24 classes, with the remaining six classes in the semester used for orientation, reviews, and examinations.

Core English is a two-semester course with the same teacher doing the class for both semesters. In this particular instance, however, one of the Core English teachers was not able to continue teaching in the second semester and it was necessary for another teacher to take over the class. Because of the difficulty of finding a teacher who was available to teach on both days of the week, it was decided that two teachers would take the course, with Toshio teaching the class on Monday mornings and Eric teaching the class on Thursday afternoons.

## **Our Experience**

While our previous paper on group dynamics focused more on theory and recommended activities and practices, our approach to this paper is to share our actual experience of the impact that group dynamics had in our classroom. While we were startled at the apathy that the class, as a whole, had at the beginning of the semester, we were just as amazed at the enjoyment and enthusiasm that became a regular part of the class as the atmosphere was transformed through positive group dynamics. It was through this experience that the significance of establishing good group dynamics was reinforced in our minds and became a fundamental aspect of our language classrooms. The remainder of the article focuses on our reflections of the experience.

### **Question 1: How did you feel about the class before it started?**

EH: I was looking forward to it. Even though I had been teaching Core English since its inception, I had only taught students in the Chinese Department and the World Liberal Arts Department, so I was excited

to do Core English with students in the Department of British and American Studies (DBAS). I had done several different classes for the department before and always enjoyed my experiences with the students. Core English had always been my favorite class to teach, and I really enjoy teaching first-year students. Students generally choose to study in DBAS because they want to improve their English skills. While teaching Core English to Chinese majors, they always started the year a bit intimidated by having an English class twice a week. Usually around midway through the first semester, as they got used to it, you could see them become more at ease and enjoy the class. Since I would be doing Core English with DBAS students, I figured that I would be walking into a class where students were looking forward to their second semester of Core English.

TA: As I have always believed in the idea of CLIL and the communicative teaching approach, I was thrilled to teach this course. Before then, I was teaching several different EFL courses as well as CLIL-based sociological courses (Cross-Cultural Studies) – dealing with social and cultural issues around the world in English, and I have always enjoyed teaching with the communicative approach and CLIL-style classes. When Core English was offered to me, along with the explanation that the course teaches all four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) and is CLIL-based, I imagined a lively and proactive classroom with an active group of students. In addition, the previous two years, I was mostly in charge of teaching third and fourth-year students, with the exception of a few first-year writing and listening classes, neither of which were communicative nor CLIL-based. Thus, teaching first-year students was going to be a fresh experience. I had only learned that DBAS students are generally fans of the English language and thus keen on learning in EFL

courses. In addition, I imagined the first-year students in a communicative CLIL classroom to be shy and quiet – almost overly well-behaved.

**Question 2: What was the first day of class like?**

TA: As I walked in, the class was noisy. I had already heard the noise of the students talking loudly before entering the classroom. As soon as I entered the classroom, I witnessed some male students were especially noisy in the boys' group and they seemed to enjoy the attention and reactions of others by making strong comments or laughing loudly. Female students were seated in a few different groups, and some were quiet while others were chatty. Naturally, most of them were gathered at the back of the classroom and some boys were sitting on desks, screaming out loud in Japanese.

In a second I stood in front of everyone, where a teacher is supposed to be, and a bunch of questions, in Japanese, were whispered among students: “Is he the new teacher?” “What happened to the original one?” “Is he a foreigner?” “Who is he?” “Where does he come from?” I fully understand Japanese and thus knew what they were whispering, but pretended I did not hear any of it. Shortly, I started my greeting, with my Australian accent. Students started to look more confused, presumably their questions grew by the end of my speech. Someone asked me if I could speak Japanese and I answered, “Only a little.”

We took over the class from the beginning of the second semester, which means the students had already known each other for a semester and, Eric and I, were the only newcomers to the class. Therefore, I wanted to introduce myself politely and properly. I didn't know why or when my predecessor left, but I felt the responsibility of explaining that I would

be one of the two successors and wanted to take over the course with full capacity and motivation. The class did not express much sadness about the change in teachers.

As it was the very first class for them to meet the new teacher and the beginning of the semester, the class only dealt with introductory activities in addition to the syllabus explanation and my speech. However, there was enough time to realise that students were only willing to talk to each other in Japanese and did not even try to speak English for a casual speaking activity to tell each other about their summer holiday. The mood of this particular classroom was disinclined and unengaged. Savage might be too extreme to describe it, but the atmosphere of the class did not indicate the motivation for learning or using English in class. The students had known each other for four months in the spring semester so there shouldn't have been a strangeness or awkwardness to work on class activities together. While the students were rather friendly to each other, they did not seem to know much about each other. They were sitting together yet were not learning together and seemingly avoiding class tasks and activities together.

EH: It went much differently than I had expected. I taught the class on Thursday afternoon. Toshio had taught the class a few days earlier, on Monday morning, but I hadn't had the chance to talk with him about the class yet. Looking back, it's probably better that I hadn't because the scene that he described would have made me apprehensive about the first class. Either fortunately, or unfortunately, I still held the belief that I was walking into a classroom of students eager to continue their English studies in Core English.

The semester had started on Monday that year and, by Thursday afternoon, I'm sure the students were tired of doing welcome back, orientation, and introductory activities. However, as it was my first time to meet the students, I spent the first half of class doing an icebreaker with a Venn diagram where the students are in pairs and use the left circle to write information about themselves then meet with a partner to see where their information overlaps to find common points between them as a means to establish stronger links with each other (Hirata & Asai, 2022). While this usually serves as an enjoyable, low-stakes activity with students using English that they already possess, I noticed that students were using mostly Japanese and not really engaging with one another even though they had studied together during the first semester. Essentially, they did the bare minimum. When they found they had something in common, such as liking the same singer, a typical response was, "Me, too." That was it. No follow-up questions or reactions after finding out that they had something similar between them. Considering that they had already finished a semester of Core English, I had assumed that asking follow-up questions and using conversation strategies would come naturally to them as they are key elements of sustaining the six-minute conversation at the end of every unit.

While this raised a bit of a red flag, I attributed it to the possibility that they were tired of doing these types of "welcome back" activities all week. On a positive note, when I sat down and talked with some of the pairs of students, they were engaged in our conversation, and they not only spoke English well but also asked me some questions to get to know me. I've found that this discrepancy sometimes occurs in classes, particularly in the beginning of courses when students don't know each other that well. Students hesitate to speak English to each other but are

pleased to talk with their teacher. This class, however, had met 30 times during the first semester and again a few days earlier, on Monday with Toshio, yet, like Toshio, I felt that it appeared the students didn't seem to know much about each other. After having that many classes together, it surprised me that not only were there no signs of positive group dynamics, but the students weren't even a group. Just a collection of students who happened to be sitting in the same classroom at the same time.

**Question 3: What were some of the difficulties at the beginning of the semester?**

TA: Motivating them to learn was hard. They attended class but did not want to participate in class discussions as well as conversation activities with each other. In this course, participation was one of the highlighted categories of assessment, and thus I emphasised the difference between attendance and participation in the syllabus explanation session and during class time. It was important to have them understand the difference, yet they did not show active participation in simple and basic activities. This was possibly because they did not have sufficient conversational skills in English. However, I was uncertain to make this assumption because they had already taken the course for one semester before they met me. Another supposition I made was that they might have been sick and tired of the cram school style of education; a memorisation-based and exam-focused learning method that Japanese young students must pass through at some stage in their schooling period.

Considering their lack of individual effort, there were also conspicuous problems. At the beginning, almost half of the class did not submit homework. With teachers chasing after them, students were repeatedly advised to submit their work, and some submitted work late. Yet, a



number of students did not even indicate a sign of attempting to do it, particularly the writing tasks. Writing tasks were assigned at the end of each unit, and nearly 40% (8 out of 21 students) did not submit the first writing task at the beginning of the semester. The quality of the submitted work was another story. It was not about their English writing skills, but more about the lack of effort. For one writing assignment, they had to write a dialog between two people, while using at least five vocabulary words from the unit. The work that they submitted didn't include any vocabulary words, and/or was an extremely short length of work with only greeting phrases and a few lines. As much as I had already been teaching several EFL courses at the university level in Japan, I knew they were capable of writing more than a few lines in English. Thus, by this point, it was clear that it was a problem of motivation and learning drive that was missing from the class.

There was a strange air drifting across the class mood. In speaking tasks, it was more visible than the other activities. This particular dynamic is not absolutely rare in EFL classes for young learners, but this attitude must have been a rarity. It was a strange type of shyness; even an attitude of delinquency, as if they wanted to avoid being a show-off by speaking good English, or purposely putting Japanese katakana endings on words. Sudden laughing at correct English pronunciation was an often-seen pattern as well. With this mood and audience attitude, it was backbreaking for one to practice speaking skills in class.

Unifying all the above, they were not academically challenged students or in school gangs. They did not boycott classes, and their attendance was actually excellent. They did not interfere in my class management by screaming or walking around. Their non-participating attitude was not

due to a lack of academic ability but a loss of drive or possibly faith due to traditional English classes. It was simply about their lack of motivation toward learning in a classroom.

EH: To be honest, there were so many things. However, the biggest problem, other than what I perceived to be negative group dynamics, was the overall atmosphere of the class, as Toshio alluded to. Usually, students are in a good mood for the first couple of lessons of the second semester. They haven't been together as a group in almost two months and the students usually feel refreshed even though their English is a little rusty since most of them don't use English during the summer break. I didn't really witness any of that in the first class. The environment in the classroom felt more like the end of a semester when it is a little more quiet than usual because everyone is busy working on submitting final assignments and preparing for final exams. Usually at that stage of the semester, the students are clearly tired when class starts and take some time to get into lessons. Eventually, as the lesson continues, the class picks up and the energy in the classroom is as positive as usual, even if it took a little longer than usual to get there. That is something to be expected in the final few weeks of a 15-week course, but definitely not in the first week! While there were a few students who happily volunteered answers and seemed eager to participate in the class, most of the group of 21 students looked like they were only in class because they had to be.

Therefore, I was somewhat surprised when I got the reflection sheets back from the students after the first couple of classes. For all my courses, I give the students a reflection sheet near the end of every class and give them a few minutes to write down any comments, feedback, or questions that they have (Hirata & Asai, 2022). This sheet is always a

great opportunity to get student's opinions and feedback while also giving me the chance to write back to them with advice and encouragement. Most of the students had said they enjoyed the class and were looking forward to the next one. That gave me hope that, since, individually, they enjoyed the lesson, the key was to get them to make their learning experience more enjoyable by learning together, as a group. It was clear, even after one lesson, that the group dynamics were negative, and that there would need to be a focus on developing a more positive environment in the classroom. While there were several other problems in the class, as Toshio pointed out, I firmly believed that a positive environment would help resolve all the other issues. If we could improve the group dynamics of the class, then everything else would either solve itself or be easier to fix.

**Question 4: What were some things you did to improve the group dynamics?**

**EH:** One thing that was important to take into consideration was that the students were probably going through an adjustment period at the start of the semester. Not only did they have a different teacher for Core English than they did from the first semester, but they actually had two new teachers to get to know and get used to.

In the last paper, I mentioned being congruent as an important part of a teacher moving into a facilitating role rather maintaining a leadership role (Hirata & Asai, 2022) in order to establish positive group dynamics in the classroom. By being congruent, I'm trying to make myself approachable to students so that they feel comfortable with me in the classroom. One way I try to do this is by sharing my own experiences with my students, particularly as a language learner. I can understand

some of their struggles with English as I share many of them in my own quest to speak Japanese. I tell them that I didn't start improving my Japanese until I stopped worrying about mistakes and just tried to communicate with the Japanese that I knew. I think students can relate to this and that hearing about my struggles and attempts to overcome them, can encourage them to do the same with English. With this class, in either the first or second week, I got the same question as Toshio about being able to speak Japanese. I similarly said, "Only a little," and then shared my struggles with Japanese with the class. I don't know whether they took it as advice or not, but they were all listening attentively and many were nodding their heads or laughing which I took to be a good sign and hopefully the beginning of establishing some congruence between us.

For every class, we started with a 5–10 minute warm up of simple English questions ranging from weekend plans, since the class was on a Thursday afternoon, to unit related topic questions. As much as possible I would try to sit with a few of the groups for a couple of minutes to listen to their answers and ask some follow up questions while also giving them the chance to ask me the same questions in return. Of course, some groups would be more engaged in the conversation than others but, especially in the early stages of the semester, I wanted the students to get to know me and feel comfortable with me. Not only that, but by having conversations with the students in small groups, I was trying to give them confidence in communicating in English. As Toshio had mentioned, we were the newcomers in this situation, not the students. Usually in the first couple of classes, I try not to join the student's conversations too much so that they can get to know each other but, in this situation, they had studied together for one semester so the only ones they didn't really know was Toshio and me. Of course, I also realized that they didn't know

each other all that well outside of their friends in the class because they didn't have the chance to talk with each other much, whether in English or Japanese, during the first semester. That surprised me because for me, Core English, at its heart, is a conversation-based class. Since every unit ends with the six-minute conversation, the most important thing, for me, is to make sure that the students have enough speaking time in class so that they have more than enough practice in speaking about the topic. Not only do I have students discuss questions about the content of the topic in pairs, but I often have them change partners, so they feel comfortable talking with and in front of all their classmates. I realized that although they had completed one semester of Core English, they hadn't been taught with any type of communicative approach. That was another key thing that we would have to change.

TA: Trust building is a key to starting a big project. The student's peculiar behaviour, which I witnessed in classes from the beginning of the semester, almost indicated an allergic reaction to classroom learning due to a lack of trust in their previous teachers. Of course, it was only my assumption based on my observation of the students, but as part of establishing a positive group dynamic, I dedicated myself to building good trust with them and encouraging them to build trust among one another.

To host and welcome this special group of students, I cared about three things; 1. I somehow felt I needed to be an interesting person grabbing their attention before being a good leader of the class, 2. I must be thoroughly friendly and approachable, 3. Focus on what they can do and never the other way around.

1. Using my living experiences in Australia, I told them a lot of stories about the lifestyle in Australia, mateship, Aussie accents and slang,

geography, work-life balance, taking a long holiday, almost no homework and friendly classroom management without many exams. They were notably surprised there is almost no homework at primary school and were even jealous of how universities in Australia usually do not have classes on Fridays. A story of how people knock off their work by 4 pm on Fridays and hurry home or to bars was one of their favourite stories. They were also very curious about who I am and questioned why my name is fully Japanese but I speak Aussie accented English. This might have been an uncommon combination to them, seemingly.

2. I always talked to them in a kind and friendly way during and after class time. It is interesting how students do not ask questions during class time but do so afterwards. Participating in speaking and conversational activities was a basic approach and it was a good relationship builder. Students generally want to know about their teachers, and this group was no exception as they welcomed me into their chats in English. They usually talked about food, friends, their favourite pop stars, and their dreams to go live overseas. It was interesting to discover how they were not motivated to learn in English class but wished to go and live overseas in the future.
3. Constant encouragement to speak English and positive comments on what they did was necessary. As those students were not confident to speak long and deep in a conversation, they tended to avoid turns and even when they spoke it was a short sentence such as “Me, too”, or “I think so, too”. Instead of having a group of three or four, I instructed them to do the speaking activity in pairs, reducing their shy moments and changing partners and topics frequently so that they could get to know as many class members as possible. It was not yet about using difficult new vocabulary words, but I focused on finding what they

could do well and emphasised those skills. Using the quote “making a mistake is the fastest way to success”, I encouraged them to make many mistakes in class because when they made one they would show irritation. I introduced a lot of EFL games to play during class time, which invited shy students to engage in playing in English without them being aware of making an effort to speak English. I gave lots of feedback verbally and in writing on all the work they submitted or engaged in class, hoping these compliments would motivate them in learning.

In addition to these things, the lecture and any explanation of words or content were delivered twice, and the second time was a more digestible, simple version with easier words.

**Question 5: When did you notice the shift in the class?**

**EH:** For me, it was just a little before the halfway point of the semester. I remember I had assigned a few discussion questions while I was preparing a slideshow for the next activity and when the timer beeped to let the students know that their five minutes was up, no one stopped talking. In previous classes, most conversations had stopped before the timer and those who were still speaking when the timer beeped, immediately ended their conversations. This was different though. As I started walking around, I was pleased, and somewhat shocked, that the students were not only still talking about the discussion questions, but they were talking in English! After letting them talk for a couple more minutes, I brought the class back together as a group and told them that they would have no problem with the six-minute conversation as they just talked for about eight minutes on the topic. They were surprised but it was evident that hearing that made them more confident about their ability to hold a conversation and continue using English in class.

As we started the next activity, the students watched a video and had to answer some comprehension questions. After giving them time to answer the questions, we came together as a class to check their answers. I asked for volunteers to answer the first question and, in addition to the usual students who raised their hands, I had more volunteers than usual ready to answer the questions. As Toshio mentioned, participation is a big percentage of the Core English assessment and I had been emphasizing the importance of raising your hand to answer questions. Not only did I always give them more than enough time to answer the questions, but I also let them check with a partner to confirm their answers. Therefore, asking them to raise their hands in this situation is fairly low risk. It appeared that, with their newfound confidence, many of them were taking that advice to heart and volunteering to answer the questions! When I grade participation in a class, I do it by giving students a participation score for every class and then, at the end of the semester they receive their score based on what they averaged for every class. In looking at my gradebook for this class, I can confirm that the participation of all 21 members of the class significantly increased in the second part of the semester. They had finally become a group engaged in Core English. They were no longer hesitant to use English in front of each other as a result of the positive learning environment that had been established in the classroom.

TA: It was a gradual change, but by the midterm season, it was clear the class experienced a tipping point. Students who came to class late in the first month started to come on time in the second month. In the second unit out of four, more students started to do the reading task before coming to class and submitting homework. Their writing homework showed



‘effort’ as they wrote much more and attempted to use more vocabulary. They reacted to my feedback and showed their appreciation by telling me that they liked those comments.

However, the most noticeable change was that they were speaking English in class! Lesson by lesson, many adjustments were applied, and one day for a speed dating activity with various topics, all students (literally every single one of them) were talking to each other in English, both pleasantly and loudly. This was an unforgettable morning. Those who could not even participate in a short conversation were now having long discussions by asking a number of follow-up questions, all in English. Finally, I felt this class would be all right. At the end of the activity, I picked a few students and asked what they talked about. They responded in English, even in front of everyone. This provided me with enough evidence that they had achieved and gained the confidence to use English in this classroom with the members of the group. I told them proudly that everyone was speaking English and changing partners or topics did not stop them. They looked surprised but were smiling. From this day onward, they did not hesitate to join in a conversation and speak in a group of three and sometimes four. The class became much noisier just as how it should be.

**Question 6: What was the class like at the end of the semester?**

EH: Completely unrecognizable from the first few classes. Speaking English in class was no longer viewed as a chore and I could enjoy my lunchtime without having to worry about my Core English class on Thursday afternoons. After teaching it for a couple of years, Core English had always been one of my favorite classes but for the first couple of weeks of the semester, this class was definitely not that, which was a disappointment

to me. However, once Toshio and I got the group dynamics in this class right, it was a joy to teach and, when the semester was over, I was a bit disappointed that I wouldn't be teaching them anymore. Students who had seemed indifferent to each other and towards learning English had been replaced by a group of hard-working, more confident English learners. Usually, a teacher does 30 Core English classes in each semester, with a total of 60 classes for the year. For this group, Toshio and I only had 15 classes each with them and that was unfortunate because they turned out to be just as good a group as all of the other Core English classes I've taught.

TA: The most obvious example is showing the power of group dynamics. They were noisy from the beginning, but the noise was all in Japanese. By the end of the term, more precisely in the second half of the semester, the noise was in English, and most importantly they were enjoying the class. They were not just attending, but truly participating in those classes. They were in fact very chatty and often asked me questions whenever they wanted to know more words and how to say this and that. They became the friendliest students that teachers can wish for. Not many absences, excellent participation, and willingness to learn were all there. The effort they made, which was only encouraged by teachers at the beginning, became so natural as they were having fun talking in English to the class members that it even felt effortless, according to some of their feedback comments. Some parents say "the more troublesome the child is, the cuter s/he is," and this case could be a similar experience for me. By seeing the dramatic change the class made, if the teachers, indeed, played a key role in changing their group dynamics, then this was definitely one of the most meaningful and recognisable teaching experiences in my career.

## Student Feedback

Both during the course and at the end of it, we asked students for some feedback on Core English and their responses felt like validation for all the work we put into the class. To improve the group dynamics in the classroom, it wasn't one specific thing that we did, but a variety of things that took place throughout the semester. We've sorted the comments into three different groups for analysis.

**Role of the Teacher.** As the head of the class, the teacher plays a significant role in the group dynamics in the classroom. We tried to be congruent with our students and tried to make the classroom environment a place where everyone could speak with confidence and without hesitation. Instead of leading the class autocratically, we embodied the role of facilitators in the class. The importance of the teacher as a facilitator in positive group dynamics was discussed in the previous paper (Hirata & Asai, 2022). Arnold and Brown (1999) stated that the task of a facilitator is “managing emotional states- encouraging positive ones and finding ways to overcome the negative ones and, ideally, utilizing both for growth” (p. 21). Based on student feedback, we feel that we achieved this in the Core English class.

- The teachers were friendly and always tried to help me.
- I got to talk with teachers lots of times. They were easy to talk to.
- The teachers were talkative in and after classes, and we could ask questions about classes.
- I was relieved that the new teachers were friendly and kind.
- I really enjoyed the second semester due to Eric and Toshio.
- I like Core English because I can have small talk with the teachers in English.

**Feedback From Teachers.** Students in Japanese culture do not proactively approach teachers, particularly those who are quiet in class. In the West, it is common to see eagerness in students and they challenge teachers while

attempting to get justification for their marks. When teaching EFL classes at the university level in Japan, it is uncommon to be challenged by students. Instead, students quietly accept their marks and mistakes. Because of this, giving not only corrections but also positive comments on their homework is necessary. Students will not proactively come to ask about the quality of their work or how to get higher scores, yet it does not mean they are not willing to improve their skills. It is essential to understand the cultural background of your students and give positive feedback to them so that they know you closely look at their work and always try to encourage them to improve. Students expressed their appreciation for this in their feedback.

- Contents were not easy, but at least the teachers explained a lot.
- A lot of homework is tough for me, but feedback is friendly, and I can learn from it.
- I got positive comments on my homework papers.
- I liked how the teachers give us lots of comments on our writing homework.
- My English improved because, I can understand what the teachers say now.
- I tried to do my homework harder than semester one.

**Classroom English Environment.** From the first few classes, it was evident that the students either were not encouraged or not given the opportunity to use English much in class during the first semester. While it wasn't easy to get them to understand that, in an English classroom, speaking English as much as you can is a good way to improve your English, we eventually got them to the point where the language in the classroom was almost exclusively English. The students commented on the benefits of these opportunities.

- I had more opportunities to speak than semester one.
- At first, I could not enjoy Core English. But now, I feel fun and I can speak

English better than April.

- This class mood became friendly and thus easier to chat during speaking activities.
- After getting to know each other, the class mood changed. I think it was because of group activities.
- The class people became more friendly to each other compared to the first semester.

## **Conclusion**

Initially, we didn't plan on writing a paper about our experiences with this Core English class. However, instead of just reading about group dynamics and ways that could help teachers attain positive group dynamics in the classroom, we thought it might be useful to provide an example of how group dynamics helped us not only transform this classroom but also helped shape our approach to teaching English in all our university classrooms.

From our observations and experiences, individual learners in a class with a negative atmosphere are not necessarily demotivated to learn but are often weary of similar textbook exercises and activities to the ones they have repeatedly practiced during their senior and junior high school years. Low motivation and expectations are what can drive down an entire class's mood and willingness to communicate.

We definitely walked into a negative atmosphere when we first took over the Core English class in the second semester. Core English is usually one of the most popular classes among first year students. We were surprised to find a classroom of students that had studied together for 30 classes in the first semester was so reluctant to talk with each other, whether it was in English or Japanese. We transformed the mood and environment in the class not because of any special materials, techniques or linguistic analyses, but because we focused on what was happening with the people in the classroom.

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