

# The Importance of a Successful Group Dynamic: Identifying Influential Behaviors

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this reflective paper, I will discuss the idea that “a successful group dynamic is a vital element in the teaching/learning process” (Hadfield, 1992, p. 10). By keeping a teaching journal, I was able to monitor student behavior, and then reflect on how it impacted group interactions and performance. I will begin by explaining the rationale behind my focus in relation to past teaching experiences. Then, I will explore a variety of behaviors by focusing on a selection of students who, I felt, had a significant impact on the groups they were in. By identifying both positive and negative key influences, it was possible for me to compare my findings with my own beliefs and with ideas presented by other researchers in the language teaching/learning field, and then look at ways to utilize such behaviors to create more successful group dynamics in my classroom.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the course of my career, I have faced a variety of challenges related to the teaching process. Many of these challenges were simply overcome through experience or further training. However, one aspect that remains a mystery to me is how to guarantee a successful group dynamic in a language classroom. During over a decade of teaching, I have witnessed different student behaviors and shifts in class atmosphere between classes, even when lessons are being taught exactly the same way. This can be witnessed in all kinds of teaching environments, and is a topic that has often been brought up by my colleagues at different teaching institutions.

In past teaching positions, I was required to teach at junior high schools, high schools, and universities across Japan. It was fascinating to see how aspects of different second language classrooms (i.e. class atmosphere, participation, motivation) dramatically changed between schools. In many cases, I felt this was not due to the language ability of the students, as testing proved that their levels were similar. Both age and gender also did not seem to be the deciding factor, as I taught in a variety of single-sex schools, and taught students of all ages. Through experience, I felt that a key aspect that improved overall performance was cohesiveness. When students jelled better as a group, they were able to achieve more by working more efficiently. This also led me to believe that individual students have the ability to disrupt class cohesiveness, and in turn, affect the performance of other students.

I am currently an English language instructor in Rikkyo University’s English Discussion Class (EDC) program. As part of this program, I teach a selection of discussion-based classes, each containing between six and nine students. All of the students come from different educational and social backgrounds, and their university majors vary between classes. In addition, this is a mandatory course, and I teach the same students for a whole semester. It is also necessary for me to keep the classes standardized, so my lessons follow similar teaching principles. Working in this position gave me the opportunity to observe student behaviors over an extended period of time and monitor the impact on the rest of the classmates.

During the first few lessons of the semester, I singled out problematic students that I felt were affecting the overall dynamics of the groups they were in. By keeping a teaching journal, I was able to document their behavior, the reactions of their classmates, and then look at ways of countering or utilizing these issues to promote cohesiveness between the students. The students that I decided to observe were as follows:

- **An introvert** (*Student A*): This student was very quiet and reserved. He came across as quite anti-social at times. He kept to himself, hardly spoke, and would sit apart from the rest of the group as often as he could. He also struggled to maintain eye-contact.
- **An L1 chatterbox** (*Student B*): This student spoke in her first language (Japanese) whenever she could. She liked to speak loudly so everyone could hear, and she was not afraid of speaking over me while I gave feedback or instructions.
- **An outspoken extrovert** (*Student C*): This student was not afraid to voice his opinions, which were often negative. He was loud, and at times, obnoxious towards his classmates and me.
- **A class clown** (*Student D*): This student showed a lack of enthusiasm from the start. He tried to entertain his classmates by responding with inappropriate answers or bad language.
- **An older apathetic student** (*Student E*): Even though this student clearly had strong language skills, he chose to sit back and put in minimal effort. He lacked attention, which was reflected in his discussions.
- **A teacher-hater** (*Student F*): This student had decided to dislike me before meeting me. She displayed a negative attitude to anything I said, and yet, seemed pleasant towards her classmates.

In addition to the students above, I also took note of incidents where students had made an impact on their group in a positive way. By documenting developments that occurred during the length of the 14-week semester, I was able learn more about the relevance of individual friendships and group cohesiveness in a language classroom.

## DISCUSSION

The English Discussion Class is broken into two 14-week semesters. As I mentioned before, I will focus on developments that occurred during the second semester. By this point, the students had already completed the first half of the program, although the group they were working with had changed. This meant that the students were comfortable with the lesson format and goals, leaving them more time to focus on forming class relationships. In the following section, I will use my journal entries to comment on the behaviors of each of the students mentioned above. I will discuss developments in these behaviors, and highlight any influences that were made upon other students.

### The Introvert

I noticed issues with Student A from the very first lesson. Rather than greet his new classmates, he sat at the other side of the classroom. This immediately affected the other students' opinion of him, as nobody approached him during an initial introduction activity. This behavior continued with each lesson. He wore a surgical mask to most of his lessons (which is not uncommon in Japan), and always left the class quickly without saying goodbye. I often noticed that he had difficulty maintaining eye-contact during speaking exercises. This made it surprising for me to hear that he belonged to a university sport's club and liked traveling abroad. Past experiences had taught me that sporty students tended to be more sociable and proactive.

As the course progressed, I started to notice changes in his participation when working with specific students. He shared the class with two other male students. One of these males had clearly taken on a role of the class leader. This student often delegated roles, answered teacher-fronted questions, and initiated talking points. Student A did not work well with this student, and often sat in silence when working in the same group. During the third lesson, I noticed a small confrontation

between the two of them. However, the other male student was more accepting of Student A's shyness, and started involving him more often during group discussions. Zoltan Dörnyei (2003) refers to this kind of student as an "encourager/supporter". This is someone who "offers praise and agreement, and who provides backing for the ideas of shy members" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 115). This acceptance dramatically improved Student A's behavior towards the group as a whole, which resulted in increased participation, and improved discussions. However, when working in an all-female group, Student A reverted back to his reserved self, making his group members uncomfortable. They were clearly nervous when asking him questions.

These shifts in behavior affected the group dynamic in different ways. When Student A lacked participation, he was not able to achieve the lesson goals. Even though this gave the other students increased speaking time between themselves, their discussions seemed broken and unnatural. However, with an encourager/supporter in the group, the group became more cohesive, as all the students become involved. This resulted in a more successful overall outcome for everyone.

### **The Extroverts**

Student B was one of the most influential students that I taught during the semester. During the first lesson, I learned that she was already known by most of the class members. I am guessing this was mainly due to her big personality. I got the impression that she liked to be the center of attention, as she spoke loudly so that everyone could hear. After the first couple of lessons, I started to hear an increased amount of L1 (Japanese) between activities and during her group discussions. As there is an expectation for students to maintain an English-only environment, this was problematic, as it became contagious. With each incident, I commented on her use of L1, but the result was often ineffective in the long-term.

Student C displayed a similar desire to be noticed. His entrances were usually dramatic, and his responses were direct. I initially believed this was due to his background, as it is a common stereotype that residents of his hometown tend to be more direct and outspoken. However, his attitude deteriorated with each lesson. During his seventh class, after confronting him regarding his poor attitude, he told me directly that he did not like the class because it was boring. As with Student B, this had a knock-on effect. Other students in the group displayed similar traits in attitude and motivation.

As part of the EDC program, we are encouraged to have the students change places as much as possible. This helps "maintain fluidity" and alleviate problems such as students "becoming bored with each other" (Hadfield, 1992, p. 52). With Student C, this was effective to a degree, but after becoming more comfortable with his group members, his negative behavior returned. With Student B, on the other hand, keeping the students on the move had almost no effect. However, by having the students change places, I was able to single out the students that were not influenced by their troublesome classmates. This allowed me to delegate a "supporting actor" (Schlechty & Atwood, 1977, p. 286). Supporting actors are often used by teachers to discipline other students. They are aware of what the teacher wants, and the performance the teacher requires, as opposed to the group leader ("lead actor"), who is less influenced by the teacher. By giving the supporting actors more influence over me, this generated more influence with their peers. This meant that, when grouped with the supporting actor, Students B and C focused more on the lesson goals, and became better integrated within the group.

### **The Rebels**

Having students that are overly-confident or feel they are superior to others is something most teachers have experienced. These behaviors can be due to a wide variety of reasons (e.g. popularity,

ability, age). In the case of two of my students (Student D and Student E), both displayed arrogant and self-important characteristics that set them apart from the group.

Student D cared about how his classmates perceived him. This led to him taking on the role of the class clown. This is a “powerful role” and “by bringing in humor, clowns can help the group relax and attend to the task” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 116). However, as Dörnyei explains, “The problem with clowning is that it very easily gets out of hand – clowns often find it difficult to stop and the group can easily get caught up in the clowning” (2003 p. 116). This turned out to be the case with Student D.

Student E was more apathetic towards studying. As he was older than his classmates, he displayed traits of self-importance and pride. He would refuse to implement my feedback or receive criticism from others. Also, Student E’s effect on the group was more specific to one student. This other student showed signs of attraction towards Student E. As attraction is likely to elicit more positive initial communication and treatment from others than his or her less attractive peers (Shaw, as cited by Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998), this had a major effect on the overall group dynamic, as other members were often cast aside during conversations or discussions.

What made Student D and Student E interesting was the difference it made when they were absent. Luckily for me, both of these students did not attend class on a number of occasions. With Student D’s class, the role of the class clown was passed down to a different member of the class. This was initially a more reserved student, who rarely spoke unless spoken to. However, when Student D was absent, this student had the ability to provide humor when appropriate, without losing control of his power. This, in effect, improved the class atmosphere and overall group cohesiveness. A similar pattern was seen when Student E was absent. A more reserved male student became more involved with his female classmates, and participated more actively throughout the lesson. In this case, all of the students appeared equally involved during group discussions/conversations. In addition, Student E’s female fan shifted her attention towards her group, rather than fixating on one member.

### **The Teacher-Hater**

The final student, Student F, was the most difficult for me to understand. Her behavioral issues were directed towards me, rather than her classmates. Her responses to my questions were sometimes sarcastic, and she refused to pay attention to my instructions and advice. Her hostility towards me was not something that developed over time, as it was there from the very start. According to Dörnyei & Murphey, “a great deal of the psychological processes underlying group formation apply to teachers as well” (2003, p. 17). Student F’s exerted influence on her classmates made me feel disconnected from the group, which removed my influence over the rest of the students. I had experienced this kind of behavior before when working at a girls’ high school. In that case, the student’s negative attitude changed after she learned information about my private life. I had forgotten about this until a similar situation occurred with Student F. As the end of the course approached, I let slip that I was married with two daughters during a fluency-related speaking exercise. Student F immediately showed interest in my answer, and my response seemed to please her. For the remainder of the lesson, her attitude towards me completely changed. She was more attentive, and showed an interest in me and my feedback. Her influence on others was apparent, as this led to better output from the other students sat at her table.

### **On a Positive Note**

Although my observations were focused on students that affected the group dynamic in a negative way, it was interesting to observe how students with positive behaviors tried to tackle these issues. As I mentioned before, I was able to use student roles such as a supporting actor and an

encourager/supporter to counter behavioral issues. I also noticed other roles stated by Dörnyei, such as an “initiator” (2003), who pushes the group to get on with the task, and an “energizer” (2003), who “does not allow the attention or group energy to flag” (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 114). This proved to me the importance of “harnessing the headstrong” by finding “roles for strong-willed students, thereby harnessing their valuable energy for positive, group building ends” (Senior, 1997, p. 8).

In addition, there were some groups that stood out from the others in terms of motivation and the successful achievement of the course goals. For example, during the first semester, I taught a class whose students majored in Business/Global Business. It was very clear that the students in this class enjoyed communicating with each other, and worked hard as a team to achieve goals set by their teacher. During the second semester, I had the opportunity to cover four other teachers’ classes whose students studied the same major. Surprisingly, all of the students in these classes displayed the same positive behavioral traits. Their level of cohesion was unlike any of my other classes. Even though I logged these incidents in my journal, I had difficulty pinpointing the reason for their behavior. I knew from my previous semester’s students that they often spent time with each other outside of the classroom (e.g. trips to amusement parks, shopping, eating out at restaurants). I was also informed that the university organizes study-abroad programs for them. Dörnyei states that “There is something very powerful about extracurricular activities: one trip can ‘make’ the group for a number of reasons. First, such experiences are typically stress-free and fun, resulting in a rewarding group experience. Second, during such outings students lower their ‘school filter’ and relate to each other as ‘citizens’ rather than ‘students’. The experience will then prevail in their memory, adding a fresh and real feel to their school relationships” (2003, p. 23). This idea made me question whether it was the time spent outside of the classroom that strengthened their relationships, thereby creating a better group dynamic in the classroom.

### **Ending with an Intergroup Competition**

In the final lesson of the EDC course, the students had the opportunity to review all of the lesson topics that they focused on during the semester. As I wanted to make sense of my journal entries, I decided to read a selection of books on the matter of group dynamics. In Jill Hadfield’s book, *Classroom Dynamics*, I had learned about various activities that help improve student relations. Some of these activities were already being used in my classes, such as having students “change places”, and the use of speaking “stations”. However, it was interesting to hear Hadfield’s approach to inter-class games or competitions. She believes competitive activities can “help group cohesion by giving the class a sense of themselves” and “provide a bit of fresh air and release from the group” (1992, p. 114).

To test Hadfield’s theory, I selected several groups that I felt had not jelled as well as others, and introduced a discussion-based game as a warm-up, practice exercise. The game followed principles that are fundamental to exercises taught at EDC, such as exercises being meaning focused, adding time pressure to promote improved fluency, and the use of pre-taught discussion skills. The students were given questions related to each lesson’s topic, and a “speaker stick”. In their groups, the students had to discuss one of the questions whilst a timer counted down. When they asked a “Discussion Skill” question, they could pass the stick to any of their group members, who would then become the speaker. If they were holding the stick when the time ran out, they lost points. The game then continued until all of the questions were discussed. This meant that they had to manage their speaking time effectively, and also choose who to put at risk by asking them questions. The result was quite surprising. The students tried their best to balance the amount of speaking turns of each member of their group, rather than targeting individuals, or avoiding their closer friends. In fact, when competing against their group members, the individual student

participation increased, and paradoxically, caused them to communicate more actively with their group members.

## CONCLUSION

By documenting my observations with a reflective journal, I was able to learn more about how students relate to each other, and what roles both the students and teacher play in a language classroom. When I first became a teacher, I was taught simple methods, such as grouping weaker students with stronger students. But through my experience and observations, I have learned that it is far more complex than that. I feel that group dynamics is an unknown concept to many language teachers, and yet, it is far more important than many of us realize. By ignoring the emotional closeness of a student group “oversimplifies the social-psychological realities of teaching and ignores the psychodynamics that are integrally a part of most academic learning” (Schmuck & Schmuck, 2001. p. 114). Not only has this reflection opened my eyes to the importance of successful group dynamics, it has also made me consider other ways of promoting cohesiveness. In the future, I will pay more attention to the relationships between my students, and better my understanding of group dynamics through research and testing.

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