Idealizing L2 Classmates to Combat Amotivation, Calculate Motivational Deviations, and Foster Group Cohesiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on the development of a motivation-building activity based on *possible selves theory* and the research of Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, and Fukada (2014) into idealizing L2 classmates. Students within 23 freshman-level university classes in Japan were asked to imagine and discuss an ideal classmate to aid in the establishment of group-accepted norms. In 12 of these classes, a mid-semester questionnaire was administered asking students to reflect on each norm and consider whether or not: (1) this was important to them (2) they did this (3) their classmates did this. This data was used to assess whether each group's motivational ideals were being fulfilled by both self and group, which – when combined with the observations of the instructor – helps to provide a more complete understanding of potential demotivators affecting group dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Second-language acquisition (SLA) is greatly enhanced when students come to class motivated to learn. However, after having passed their university entrance exams, some Japanese freshman find themselves back in an L2 classroom lacking the desire to communicate in a second language and with little purpose beyond getting enough points to earn course credit. Ushioda (2013) attributes this to two main factors: (1) the grammar-focused method of learning "English for exams" (*juken eigo*) in high school, "with little attention paid to the development of communication skills," and (2) the "leisure-land existence" created by Japanese universities, where students "face few real incentives or pressure to work hard, since progression and graduation are effectively guaranteed in a system where university name value carries more weight than individual academic performance," a combination that creates what Berwick and Ross (as cited in Ushioda, 2013) dubbed the "motivational wasteland" (p. 5-6). As a result, university teachers may be tasked with the challenge of motivating students who see no perceived need to communicate in an L2.

In a previous study of motivation in low-proficiency archetypes, the author documented attempts to motivate two students, finding one's peers to have the greatest impact on willingness to communicate and overall class participation (Peragine, 2018). However, as the study began late in the semester, its conclusion echoed Ushioda's (2013) belief that students who begin their university courses with low motivation tend to remain poorly motivated and are more likely to be affected by negative learning experiences, whereas those who begin with high motivation are better able to stay motivated despite challenges. Nitta and Asano (as cited in Ushioda, 2013) best sum this up by saying, "initial motivational states can be a litmus test for predicting the success of classroom learning" (p. 9). It was clear that any further attempts to address motivation must begin in the first lesson and rely on social dynamics to have greater impact on student behaviors.

As university L2 classes typically require more cooperative learning than those in high school, it is essential to establish effective work groups. Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) suggest that effective groups can contribute significantly to the success and failure of the L2 classroom, as group-based motives impact how learners feel in their L2 classes, citing its positive effect on "the quantity and quality of interactions," "cooperation between students and the extent of individual involvement," "student behavior," "student relationships with their peers and the teacher," and "student and teacher confidence and satisfaction" (p. 67). Therefore, a solid motivational framework should consider group dynamics starting from *group formation* when participants meet and establish *group norms*, or the standards of behavior essential for groups to

function efficiently (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). However, group norms differ greatly from *institutional norms* found in syllabi or imposed by teachers in that they are not internalized as true group norms without first being accepted by all members, making it worthwhile to introduce a norm-building procedure early on that allows students to evaluate potential norms to agree upon acceptable class behaviors (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). This process not only fosters student autonomy but also helps individuals to clearly express and understand how one is expected to act within the newly formed community of learners.

As students enter the L2 classroom, emotions may range from confidence to anxiety stemming from past learning experiences. According to Brown (2007), as L2 learners use a new language, "they also develop a new mode of thinking, feeling, and acting—a second identity" known as the *language ego*, which becomes "intertwined with the second language, [and] can easily create within the learner a sense of fragility, a defensiveness, and a raising of inhibitions" by which "highly intelligent adults can be reduced to babbling infants" (p. 72). A study by Falout, Elwood, and Hood (2009) describes how negative past language learning experiences can remain with students, particularly less-proficient students in non-English majors, leaving them more susceptible to demotivation and less able to control their affective states when confronted with demotivating experiences. Students carry with them both positive and negative "academic emotional baggage" known as *antecedent conditions of the learner* (ACL) that can either help them maintain self-belief and cope with stress while learning EFL or render them susceptible to learned helplessness, "which can trigger psychological and behavioral patterns that disrupt both the immediate learning and long-term self-regulation for repairing damages done to self-belief" (Falout, Fukada, Murphey, and Fukuda, 2013, p. 247). If university students are coming to class with emotional baggage due in part from their high school's English-for-exams approach to learning, it makes sense for teachers to view themselves as hotel porters, eagerly relieving students of their baggage with a motivational system designed to address the language ego.

DISCUSSION

Positive learning experiences that occur in supportive classroom environments have the ability to transform students. This is because ACLs are socially malleable, as new perspectives can lead to the reimagining of past experiences through a process known as *reattribution* (Fukada, Fukuda, Falout, and Murphy, 2011). However, Dörnyei (2009) notes that while most assume one's self-concept to be derived from past experiences, Markus and Nurius (as cited in Dörnyei, 2009) point to a more dynamic self-system that incorporates *possible selves*, which refers to how people see themselves through their hopes and fantasies, becoming *future self-guides* capable of sustaining goal-oriented behavior. Higgins (as cited in Dörnyei, 2009) further divides these future selves into the *ideal self* (hopes and aspirations) and the *ought to self* (obligations and moral responsibilities), the latter of which could serve to facilitate the acceptance of proposed norms as right and proper when discussed by students. Building on these concepts, Dörnyei (2009) proposed an *L2 motivational self-system* comprised of the *ideal L2 self* and *ought-to L2 self* but also added the *L2 learning experience*, which factors in the teacher, curriculum, peer group, student success, and overall learning environment. Just like ACLs, possible selves are also socially malleable, and therefore discussing these imagined selves within a supportive group atmosphere can help students "reframe past experiences" and inspire "new hope for the future [as] they address the present with greater motivation" (Fukada, et al., 2011, p. 338). Providing time at the start of a new course for discussions that bolster the language ego not only creates a motivational foundation for students but can also foster group cohesion through a shared vision of future achievement while simultaneously providing teachers an opportunity to observe students' expectations of the course—becoming both litmus test and roadmap to success.

PROCEDURE

For an L2 motivational self system to exert its power, it should be activated and maintained starting from the first lesson. Drawing from the research of Murphy, Falout, Fukuda, and Fukada (2014), a socio-dynamic approach was taken, for instead of asking students to imagine future selves, they were asked to imagine "possible proximal classmates behaving positively towards the self in the present," or more simply - an ideal classmate (p. 242). Murphy, et al. (2014) postulate that once images of an ideal classmate are recalled or imagined, they are then applied to the self through a process they call "reciprocal idealizing," thus generating "self motivations with behavioral outcomes, which themselves in turn positively influence the motivations and behaviors of other classmates that interact with the self" (p. 242). By having students describe an *ideal L2 classmate*, they are not only being subconsciously influenced by their own imagining of whom they would like to learn from and with, but they are also directly telling one another about their expectations for their peers, allowing for the clear establishment of accepted group norms.

Group Formation

The activities were conducted in 23 mandatory freshman-level university English Discussion Classes (EDC) over the course of two consecutive semesters (spring n = 77, fall n = 89) at three levels: level 1 (TOEIC 680 or above), level 2 (480-679), and level 3 (280-479). Regular lesson grades (70%) consist of attendance, participation, quizzes, and the assessment of students' use of both *discussion skills* (i.e. opinions, reasons and examples) and *communication skills* (i.e. clarification and paraphrasing). Three group discussion tests (30%) are also administered in lessons 5, 9, and 13 to assess the students' ability to use the skills.

The first lesson began with an icebreaker activity followed by a series of scaffolded pair-work activities designed to either introduce general communication skills (in spring) or review discussion skills from the previous semester (in fall) while providing students an opportunity to get to know one another better by discussing topics of personal interest. Once students felt more comfortable with the skills and each other, they were asked to consider a list of 12 characteristics of an ideal classmate (Appendix A), which were based on the 16 descriptors of ideal L2 classmates created by the students of Murphey, et el. (2014). Students were instructed to choose the three most important descriptors (or generate their own ideas) that would make the class better. Next, they discussed their ideas with a partner for eight minutes. After that, students were rearranged into groups of three or four to discuss the following questions for 16 minutes: "What are the most important things to do to make the class better?" and "What actions make the class worse?" Finally, each group wrote their top three descriptors on the board, which were then discussed together as a class. The top three choices for each group were recorded by the instructor and used in subsequent lessons for norm reinforcement, goal-setting, and motivational feedback.

Data with regard to students' own perceptions of the activity were collected in the final lesson and sorted by level. Believing that factors beyond level could potentially affect student behaviors, data were also sorted based on the instructor's initial qualitative perception of group sociability (extroverts, average, or shy), which was determined in the time before the first lesson began by observing whether students greeted others in their L1 or quietly looked at their phones or books avoiding eye contact. Participants (n = 77) were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements that follow using a four-point Likert-type scale with a value of 1 representing *strongly disagree* and 4 being *strongly agree*: (1) discussing the ideal classmate made me want to be a good classmate, and (2) in general, my classmates tried to be ideal classmates. Overall, high average responses (3.61 for Q1 and 3.75 for Q2) demonstrate a strong endorsement of both statements but also indicate the perception that peers try harder to achieve the ideals than the respondents themselves. The data also indicated that higher level groups

tended to agree more strongly with the statements, whereas both shy and lower-level groups were less emphatic in their agreement (see Figure 1).

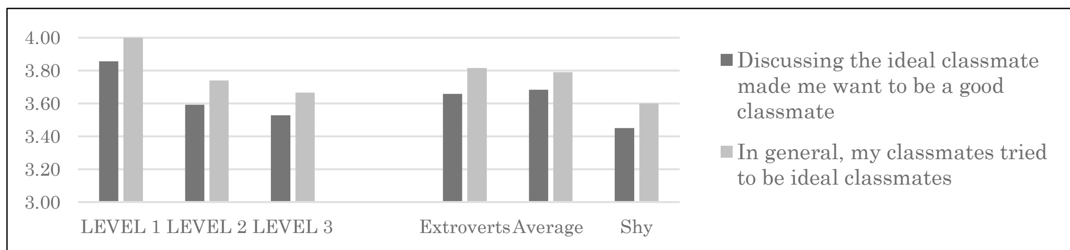

Figure 1. Student perceptions of the ideal classmate (spring semester survey results).

Spring participants were given the option to comment, giving responses such as the following:

> It was good to realize ourselves what we should do and what we really wanted to achieve. Without discussing this, we couldn't have considered these fundamental things.
>
> My friend asked me how she can be [a better] speaker in discussion and I gave her advice. If we talk about these things, we can get other perspectives and be more motivated I think.
>
> This broke the ice for us honestly speaking because we were able to state our personal opinion without worrying we might be corrected because it is something we "want". ☺
>
> There were many students, each with their own worries and concerns, but because there was a universal idea, we were absolutely able to do our best.

As there were no negative comments, the activity was repeated but with variations intended to better quantify students' perceptions of the descriptors and track motivational changes.

Storming, Norming, or Performing? (Deviation within the mid-semester questionnaire)

While initial motivational states seemed to be positively affected by idealizing L2 classmates in the formative stage, I hoped to devise a way to track student motivation and group cohesion throughout the entire 14-lesson fall semester. According to Tuckman (as cited in Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997), there are five stages of group development: *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning*. The first stage, *forming*, relates to when "the group forms and members become oriented towards each another" through "tentative interactions that can be characterized by polite discourse and silence" (p. 71). Groups typically undergo a *storming* phase in which "members express their individuality by becoming hostile to one another, the leader and the task" (p. 104). Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) note that during this phase ideas may be criticized and speakers interrupted, but teachers should not worry or blame themselves for being too lenient and instead view it as both a normal and welcome sign of group development, with teachers acting as mediators to guide groups through the storm. *Norming* occurs when groups build cohesiveness due to well established norms that regulate behavior, creating a "we-feeling" characterized by increased supportiveness amongst members (p. 71). *Performing* groups have matured, enabling them to function in unison to achieve goals thanks to cooperation and less emotionality (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). By asking students mid-semester to reassess the descriptors of idealized L2 classmates, it was believed that quantitative patterns might emerge within the data, shedding light on whether groups were storming, norming, or performing.

The questionnaire (Appendix B) was expanded to include the eight most popular idealized L2 descriptors in no particular order. It was administered either just before or after the group's second discussion test, which may have affected participant responses depending on whether they were feeling anxious or relieved. However, having participants reassess the descriptors before an assessed group discussion could also benefit the study, as the data directly reflects group dynamics within a high-pressure situation. Participants (n = 89) were asked to indicate how important each descriptor was to them using a four-point Likert-type scale consisting of values (1) not at all, (2) a little important, (3) important, and (4) very important. They were then asked "Do you do this?" and "Do your classmates do this?" using the same four-point scale consisting of values (1) never, (2) sometimes, (3) often, and (4) always. Class responses to the three questions were averaged, thus creating a value for each descriptor that represents the group's *perceived level of importance* (PLI), *perceived self* (PS), and *perceived classmates* (PC) respectively. By subtracting the PS or PC from the PLI, a new value emerges, representing the level of deviation from the group's ideals, which for the purpose of this study will be referred to as *internalized deviation* (ID) and *Externalized Deviation* (ED) respectively. These values were then used to reevaluate and support groups, as described both quantitatively and qualitatively in the following case studies based on both data collected and teacher journal entries. All student names used are pseudonyms.

Case Study #1 – Shy or Struggling? (Norming)

Before the first fall lesson began, most students quietly flipped through the syllabus, but by the end of the formation process they appeared more enthusiastic and positively motivated. Still, week after week, they began class speaking in whisper-like voices until the less shy students spoke up. As there were a few comparatively lower-proficiency students, I made efforts to regularly support them. A rather extreme example seemingly lacking in confidence was Yuki, who typically avoided eye contact when members asked open questions or, when asked directly, would repeat the question in his L1 before providing a minimal response.

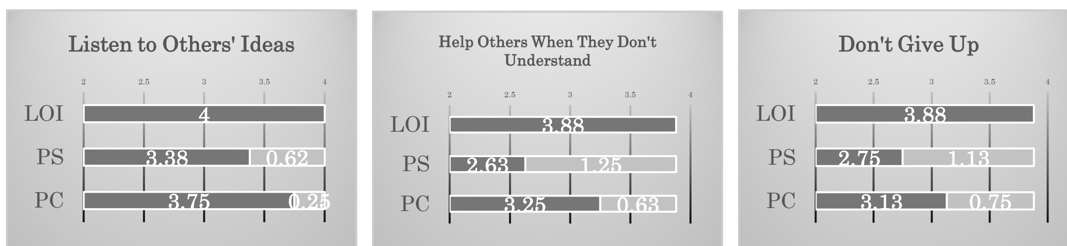

Figure 2. Student results from case study #1

In the first lesson, students emphasized the importance of listening to others' ideas (ID=0.62), helping others when they didn't understand (ID=1.25), and not giving up (ID=1.13), but a high ID in the latter two categories indicated some difficulty that could be causing demotivation. Due to this, more time was allocated to the review of communication skills to assist students still struggling to achieve this valued norm. Also, I noticed one participant had assigned a PS value of 1 to these categories, making it clearer how severe the problem was. Believing it to be Yuki, I asked him after class how he was feeling, which allowed him to open up about his concerns and get additional support with communication skills. While Yuki still struggled at times, he appeared to gain confidence as his classmates helped him paraphrase unclear ideas, and he even began raising his hand slightly at times, signaling an increased desire to participate. As the group repaired issues in norming, they seemed better equipped for performing.

Case Study #2 – The Self-Appointed Chairman (Storming)
From the start, this was an extroverted group of students, many of whom knew each other from other classes. Riku joined the group in the second lesson, becoming an active participant. However, in the first discussion test, Riku took over the discussion—interrupting others, directing who should speak when, summarizing and choosing topics without group consent, and calling on people directly to answer convoluted questions before saying 'Oh, you don't know?' and then answering himself—all of which affected the scores of others. Riku's actions ran contrary to *consensus mobilization*, a function of leadership proposed by Munich (as cited in Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1994) involving reflection, summarizing, clarification, the use of silence to give space to group members, and deflection, or "stepping aside and returning responsibility for a question or problem to the group" (p. 157). After the discussion, I provided feedback on how balance could be better achieved, reminding Riku of previously learned discussion skills such as "Does anyone want to say something?", "Does anyone have any questions?" or "Is there anything to add?" that would allow for equal participation. Things gradually improved, but in the second discussion test, Riku once again took over to similar effect.

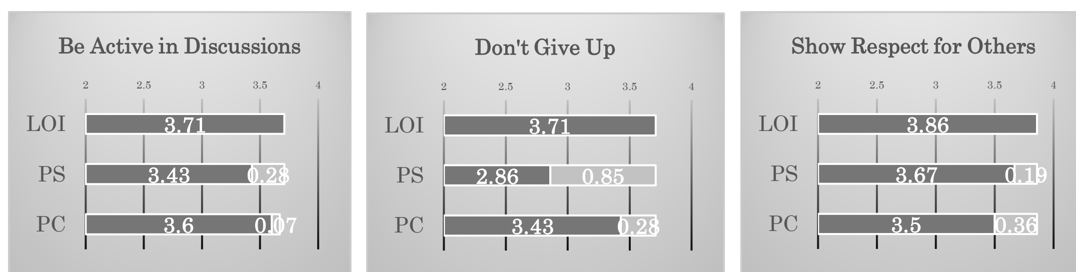

Figure 3. Student results from case study #2

The data confirmed what Riku had been ignoring - his group was storming. Students appeared to feel they (ID=0.28) and others (ED=0.07) were being active in discussion, yet despite their efforts something was making them feel like giving up (ID=0.85). In the majority of cases, PS was lower than PC, perhaps due to factors such as humbleness or self-confidence. However, the data for this particular group indicated that students felt like they were showing more respect than they were receiving (PS=0.19 < PC=0.36). Since I had already offered my advice on a few occasions, I decided the best way for the group to weather the storm was to face it head on. The next time Riku dominated his group, I posed a feedback question for group discussion: "How can we work together better to have a more balanced group discussion?" Riku's classmates directly reiterated to him what I had already said, but after hearing it from peers, he appeared to listen more and trust in his group members. And come the final discussion test, scores improved by a full letter grade, but more importantly, so did their teamwork and motivation.

Case Study #3 – The Rebel Turned Leader (Performing)
Before the first lesson, I was informed about Ken, who in the previous semester had been accused of disruptive behavior and bullying. Optimistically, I thought it would be a great test for this study. The class had some lower-proficiency students, but all seemed highly energetic and tried hard to express themselves in their L2 while using EDC communication skills. When it came time to discuss the ideal classmate, I overheard an interesting interaction. One student directly told Ken, "I think it's important to respect others because it will make class comfortable for everyone." Ken responded, "But I think listening to others' ideas is the most important. I want people to listen to

what I say so we can talk together." The other student diplomatically explained, "I think if we listen to each other, it's part of showing respect, so let's listen and respect each other." Despite this, all groups agreed in the end that to "laugh and have fun" was most important. Realizing what an overly exuberant class this was, I commented that the use of humor in an L2 was one of the highest-level skills and then challenged them with two ground rules: jokes should stay on topic and be in English. They all happily agreed, and I looked forward to a lively yet respectful class.

As weeks passed, I occasionally noticed Ken disengaging from pair work, so I directed topic-based questions at him to reengage him, and whenever I overheard him adding interesting ideas, I praised him for it. His communicative ability was higher than others, so I often used him to help me model activities. At times, this high-energy class tended to get a bit noisy, making it difficult to refocus them after activities. The lesson before administering the questionnaire, I ended class by reminding everyone that when I call for attention, they needed to stop and listen carefully to my feedback. Surprisingly, the next time I tried to stop an activity, it was Ken's emphatic "Shhh!" that called everyone to order, something that could be attributed to well-internalized norms causing "active support for the teacher's efforts to have the norms observed" (Dörnyei and Malderez, p. 70). Daniels (as cited in Dörnyei, 1997) states that the norm systems of cooperative learning result in learners gaining social approval for helping others achieve success, going against the "norm of mediocrity" found in other educational contexts that labels diligent students a "nerd" or "teacher's pet" (p. 488). Ken was working for the approval of his group—not the teacher.

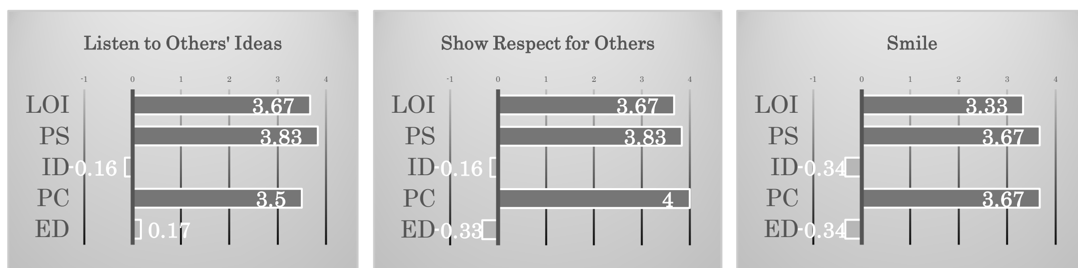

Figure 4. Student results from case study #3

Students achieved their norm to "laugh and have fun," as represented by an ID and ED of 0 for this descriptor. Moreover, there were a surprising number of instances in which PS and PC exceeded LOI, meaning students' perception of both self and others seemed to surpass their own ideals. Despite being noisy at times, I felt reassured that students seemed comfortably able to listen to others (ID=-0.16) within an atmosphere where students smiled (ID=-0.34/ED=-0.34) and showed respect for others (ID=-0.16=-0.33). They were not only achieving the goals of the course, but in terms of group dynamics, this group was performing. After the final lesson, many students expressed emotion during the adjournment process, but what surprised me most was that Ken waited until everyone else had left class to thank me.

Adjourning (Lesson 14)

Ken's farewell was a moving end to the class, a reminder that after months of working together, all class members – even the teacher – need closure. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) note that *adjourning* may be "associated with a feeling of emptiness and loss" that if perceived negatively "can have detrimental effects on future L2 learning experiences," and therefore they warn that a group's end should "be managed as deftly as their beginning" (p. 71). Fortunately, my classes had already told me the kind of students they wanted to become, so I concluded the course by writing

those valued norms on the board and recounting all the ways they had fulfilled those roles, making them not only ideal classmates for one another, but also ideal students for me. While delivering this speech, I noticed many students smiling and nodding their heads in agreement.

VARIATIONS

There are many potential variations of this activity, which could occur in either the formation stage or at later stages of the semester in conjunction with other activities to strengthen the motivational framework of the course. In the formation stage, many patterns which emerged are worthy of further study. For example, groups perceived to be shy tended to value the descriptor "smile" whereas more extroverted groups typically selected "laugh and have fun," thus creating a binary that signals the kind of class instructors can expect. By increasing the number of descriptors and employing a process of qualitative reverse engineering, other binaries might arise, allowing for richer categorization that could help instructors better adapt to each unique group. Alternatively, students could discuss their opinions of what makes the ideal teacher, allowing more adaptable instructors to receive direct input from groups.

As for the later stages, perhaps having students reassess the descriptors at multiple intervals and giving them more insight regarding the data collected could facilitate more autonomous self-regulation. Murphey and Falout (as cited in Murphey et el. 2014) believe that *critical participatory looping* (CPL), a process by which instructors return research data to students for their evaluation and comments, not only helps to encourage reflection on the learning process through ongoing dialogical exchange, but they also claim that the students themselves report it helped them both increase and sustain motivation to learn because they could see what others like themselves were doing to improve language learning. CPL could also be incorporated into a system of individual goal-setting and connected to motivational feedback provided throughout the course.

CONCLUSION

This study found a positive correlation between idealizing L2 classmates and student motivational levels. Even without assessing deviations, the practice of idealizing classmates had an immediate positive affect on group behaviors, as the socioaffective process of negotiating group norms facilitated their acceptance while also addressing the language ego through reciprocal idealizing. As a result, students displayed higher levels of autonomy, making them more receptive to student-led feedback activities with groups becoming more invested in their own success. However, the added benefit of a mid-semester questionnaire is that it allows for the evaluation of deviations in students' norm perceptions, providing further reflection on how to help groups move from storming to performing. As instructors, we have a qualitative sense of what is happening in our classrooms, but when confronted by quantitative data, it becomes easier to see how those factors are affecting our students. By observing general trends, it can also help in the planning of future courses. For example, in this study, the descriptor with the highest average deviation, both internal (ID=0.75) and external (ED=0.44) was "helping others when they don't understand," signaling that more classroom time should be dedicated to communication skills. The second highest external deviation was "preparing well for class" (ED=0.3), suggesting that more emphasis should be placed on preparation beyond our weekly quiz. By looking at the data, it allows for reflection on both classes and curriculum – present and future – becoming a future self-guide for teachers.

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APPENDIX A – The Ideal Classmate Discussion

Discussion 1: The Ideal Classmate

Preparation

✣ ***What can students do to make the class better for everyone? Check 3 ideas that you think are best.***

Things to do	Check
Smile	
Listen to others' ideas	
Help others when they don't understand	
Prepare well for class (ex: reading)	
Don't give up	
Be active in discussion	
Help each other outside of class (ex: LINE group)	
Show respect for others	
Know everyone's name	
Laugh and have fun.	
Teach others new words	
Show passion	
Your idea: ___________________________________	

✣ ***Discuss your ideas with a partner.***

Discussion

1. What are the most important things to do to make the class better?
2. What actions make this class worse?

APPENDIX B – Mid-Semester Student Questionnaire

THE IDEAL CLASSMATE - QUESTIONNAIRE

In *Lesson 1*, you talked with your classmates about **the ideal classmate.** Below are the top responses that you believe make an ideal classmate. Please answer these questions based on how you feel about this now:

A		B		C	
How important is this to you?		Do **you** do this?		Do **your classmates** do this?	
4	Very Important	4	Always	4	Always
3	Important	3	Often	3	Often
2	A little important	2	Sometimes	2	Sometimes
1	Not at all	1	Never	1	Never

I think arriving on time is very important.

EX: Arrive on time		
A	B	C
4	4	4
3	3	**3**
2	**2**	2
1	1	1

My classmates often arrive on time.

I sometimes arrive on time.

1. Don't give up			2. Help others when they don't understand			3. Be active in discussions			4. Show respect for others		
A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

5. Prepare well for class (ex: homework reading)			6. Listen to others' ideas			7. Laugh and have fun			8. Smile		
A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1