

Group dynamics: The key to our autonomous group projects

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Yoko Morimoto and 14 former students in the EPC Group 2001 at Meiji University conducted a collaborative research on factors affecting their motivation in relation to the group formation process of this unusually successful learning group. They found that the absence of opportunities to get to know each other at the beginning of the course hindered the group formation process, and this led to primary tension in the group for a full year, leading to 10 of the 24 students leaving the course. However, given the opportunity to assist in the selection of new students the following year, they were able to express themselves, confront one another, and get to know each other more profoundly. The group became cohesive, autonomous, and efficient, resulting in numerous student-initiated English projects. Recommendations by the students and Morimoto for fostering group dynamics in L2 classrooms are provided.

明治大学の森本陽子とEPC2001年度入学生の14人が、このまれにみる優れた学習グループにおいての動機付けの要素について、グループ形成との関係に重点におき、共同研究を行った。その結果、最初に互いを深く知り合う機会がなかったことが、彼らを1年にもわたって「初期不安」で苦しめ、それは、24人中10人のクラスメートが辞めていく結果にもつながったことが判明した。しかしながら、次の年に、新入生選抜に彼らが関わったことをきっかけに、彼らはそれぞれの意見を表現し、ぶつかり合い、その結果互いをより深いレベルで理解するようになったこともわかった。その時点から、グループは非常に結束を強め、自律的、そして能率よく行動することができるようになり、数多くの学生主導による英語のプロジェクトを敢行するに至った。この研究結果に基づいた、学生達から教師への提言と、森本による、より一般的なL2授業でのグループダイナミックスの促進のための提言がまとめられている。

““ **M**y class just doesn’t gel....” I have felt this way many times in my teaching career of 20-some years. This seems to be quite a universal phenomenon. Many teachers around the world feel the students in their classes just do not get along well with each other and this interferes with the actual learning activities in and outside class. After carrying out a survey on teacher complaints in staff rooms all over the UK, one researcher reported that “by far the most common complaint was, as one teacher put it, ‘My group just doesn’t gel!’”(Hadfield, 1992:7).

The situation in my classroom has been no exception. However, after a serious slump of one group in first year, they miraculously *resurrected* as a cohesive and autonomous group (Morimoto, 2004, 2005) In this paper, Takeshi Kohmoto, representing the students, and I, based on collaborative research undertaken by the 14 students who formerly comprised the class, discuss:

1. What is EPC and the Group 2001?
2. What did the students discover about their changes in level of motivation over the first three years?
3. The student presentation at the Learner Development Forum at JALT 2004 which was based on their research.
4. What did I discover by observing video tapes of student discussions about their motivational changes in the first two years?
5. The recommendations I would make to language teachers, based on the research and focusing especially on group dynamics.

English Proficiency Course

The English Proficiency Course (EPC) was a four-year semi-intensive elective English course in the School of Political Science and Economics at Meiji University. This program was reformed in 2003, and it is now called Advanced Communicative English (ACE). The focus of EPC was on improving communicative and academic English skills through numerous small group and self-study project-oriented activities employing multi media, such as PowerPoint, digital still and video cameras, learner corpus based English learning software, and homepage building software.

Students in the first two years attended classes that met three times a week. Each class was independent in terms of content, and was taught by different teachers. The third and fourth year classes met only once a week. The first two years, therefore, constituted the most intensive phase, and students earned full credit toward their graduation requirements. In the third and fourth years, no credits were awarded toward graduation. Participation in the English camps, held twice a year in spring and autumn, was required.

The Group 2001

In 2001, this group which we call *Group 2001* entered this program, graduating in March 2005. A brief history of the group follows.

The first year

Motivation declined steeply after summer break. 10 out of the 24 students dropped out by Christmas. The group looked as if it might just fall apart....

The second year

The year began with the selection process for new first and second year students. Group 2001 was invited by the teachers to get involved. The group suddenly became extremely motivated, initiating and executing numerous English projects as a cohesive group. Projects included in-class debate tournaments, creating their homepage during the summer break, organizing and leading two very successful English camps, writing and performing a play about a court case, making a film to insert into the play, producing a news show, and performing the musical “The Lion King” on campus.

The third and fourth years

Although only meeting once a week during these two years, they continued to be a cohesive group supporting each other academically, socially, and personally. Many continued to improve their English autonomously and independently, while maintaining their former levels of active participation both in and outside course requirements in group projects, such as making English films and researching and presenting at JALT2004.

Post-graduation

Group members still stay in touch although they are walking different paths now. Overall, all have become comfortable communicating in English, and a few now study at graduate schools in the UK, US, and Japan at which instruction is given primarily in English. Compared to other past EPC groups, this group was more successful in improving their

English proficiency and utilizing it in their academic and professional lives.

Our collaborative research begins

The sudden leap in terms of level of motivation between first and second year provided the inspiration for me to begin my research. I have given presentations about this group for two consecutive years at the JALT LD Forum. In the first presentation, my co-presenter was an educational psychologist, Dr Krahachi, and in my second presentation, my co-presenters were 11 of my students, including Takeshi Komoto. (Morimoto & Kurahachi, 2003; Morimoto & students, 2004)

For our presentations in 2003 and 2004, my students and I created short videos showing what prompted my research and how we analyzed the group formation process. These and other artifacts of student learning were shown at JALT 2005. Most of them were done in the second year. The level of student commitment and enthusiasm as well as the time they spent on task were well beyond what any teacher would expect of their students. They worked into the night at friend’s places, and many spent days without sleep to carry out these projects, many of which were totally student-initiated.

The result: Group dynamics was the key

In order to assist in my research, I videotaped the students discussing in Japanese the changes in their motivational levels. For a detailed description and analysis, please refer to Morimoto, 2005 and Morimoto (In Press). What struck

me as I watched and analyzed these tapes was that it was primarily human relations or group dynamics that mattered to and affected the students, rather than what teachers did in class. Some issues that I discovered in using principles of group dynamics to assist in the analysis included:

1. The class needed to become a *cohesive group* to be able to facilitate more autonomous learning.
2. The *primary tension* lasted for almost a year and that made group formation extremely difficult. During this period, students continued to be uncomfortable in the presence of each other, which led to inefficiency in learning.
3. The confrontation stage was necessary for the group to get to know each other at a more personal and profound level, and the selection process provided a perfect opportunity.

Student perspectives

Later, during their fourth year, the group conducted their own analysis on the formation of their group, and described it in Table 1.

Students identify the critical point: The selection process

The third stage seems to be the key to understanding the sudden change: the selection process, a significant event when we students were asked by the teachers to be involved in the selection process of EPC, where, in small groups, we interviewed each applicant in Japanese and later got into an emotionally-loaded debate over whom to select, which also

resulted in confronting our teachers on the conclusion.

There seem to be five major ways in which this process helped us form a cohesive group:

1. As each student was responsible for interviewing a few applicants and representing their interests, everybody was required to express their opinions in the group.
2. We felt responsible to redefine and create EPC.
3. Each felt trusted by our peers and teachers to do a good job.
4. For the first time we confronted each other in a 20-hour-long heated and emotional discussion, especially about whom to choose to add to our already existing but not yet cohesive group.
5. With so much contact time in this special situation, we got to understand and respect others on a profound level.

Yoko's comments on the students' analysis:

It is interesting to note that all those five factors above happen to coincide exactly with factors which help overcome the *primary tension* in the discipline of group dynamics. In a way, this group was demonstrating a *textbook case* of group formation, except that this group achieved one of the very few and rare instances where they actually got through to the fourth stage in spite of the fact that they spent their first whole year experiencing the primary tension.

Table 1. A class becomes a cohesive and autonomous learning group

Phase	Phase title	Time frame	Phase description
First	Forming	April 1st year ~ Autumn camp, 1st year	Primary tension lasts for the entire first semester and much of the second semester in the first year. As we are anxious about how we are perceived by others in the class, and cannot trust each other, the group work does not go smoothly. On the surface though, everybody behaves as if everything is going well. Inside the class some of the students try to pull the whole class along, but we lose 10 people by December.
Second	Sub-grouping	Autumn camp, 1st year ~ April, 2nd year	Subgroups start to form. Within each subgroup, members start to get to know each other better, and build trust with each other. There is no concept of the whole group at this stage.
Third	Confrontation	Selection process in April, 2nd year Spring camp, 2nd year ~ Autumn camp, 2nd year	After many confrontations during the selection process, the subgroups that formed in phase two and other students around the groups start making compromises. At the same time, the groups realize their need to think about people who do not belong to any subgroup. As a result of confrontations and negotiations, we come to understand each other much more deeply. Norming also begins to form in the group, defining some group rules and roles of members. Now that the group has become a cohesive unit, members begin to understand each other even more deeply thorough various academic and social activities, and difficulties and joy that we experience together. Performances of Virtual Trial and first performance of “The Lion King” in December
Fourth	Performing	~ The final performance of The Lion King in January in the second year	Group formation is completed having done numerous projects together, and by the time we perform the musical, Lion King in January in our second year, the members feel that the group is completely solid, and that there is so much mutual trust and understanding that we can now fully concentrate on performances and learning without having to worry about human relationships. We trust each other so much that we can accept criticism from our peers and learn from them without feeling hurt. A sort of nirvana or ecstasy seems to be experienced both individually and as a group at every event and at every gathering of this group.

Further student findings

The Group 2001 conducted a further survey using a questionnaire and interviews, and made some observations of their changes and came up with some suggestions for the teachers. They summarize them as follows:

A paradigm shift was called for on the part of students

We found that a paradigm shift in learning attitudes was necessary to become functional in our group work, as we were not used to working in groups before we entered the university, and we were more used to having passive attitudes toward learning in general.

Group work facilitated development of autonomy and motivation

We found that group work requiring work outside class time facilitated both increased autonomy and motivation.

Trust and freedom cultivated responsibility

The trust that we felt from our teachers and being given lots of freedom resulted in cultivating our sense of responsibility.

Cultivation of personal relationships between teachers and students through social activities and camps improved our relationships

Cultivating personal relationships between teachers and students through social activities and camps enabled us to communicate with each other more easily, and also helped

us to respect each other as people, not just teachers and students. This seemed to help us become less codependent on each other and also led us overcome some cross-cultural barriers we had felt with our foreign teachers.

The group helped pursuing future goals and that in return maintained our motivation toward English

All this group work in EPC helped us not only improve our English, influencing each other positively, but also maintain our future goals in terms of our English and career development, and this kept our motivation toward learning English high. We came to influence each other more positively as we became a cohesive group.

Opportunities to present to others motivated us further

Constant opportunities to present a variety of group projects to others in and outside class, such as in English camps and semi-public presentations on campus, kept our motivation high, maintaining our short-term goals.

Division and rotation of roles was effective

Division of roles and rotating the role of the leader developed a sense of responsibility in each member of the group as well as motivation to support one another.

Classes scheduled right before meal times facilitates group formation

It is very effective for group formation if the classes are held

in the periods right before lunch or dinner break, especially in the first year, as it is easier to socialize after those classes.

Teachers should clarify the objectives for what they are asking us to do in their class

It is important for students to be informed by the teacher where they are in terms of the long range goals the teachers have set for them. Therefore, a detailed syllabus for any given course is very helpful.

Successful graduates as near-peer role models are very influential

In our first few years in the program, we were introduced to some graduates with successful international professions, such as a UN staff member, a diplomat, and a journalist based abroad. Encountering graduates who have used English to achieve their career goals early in our university life helped us set our long-range career and English goals much earlier than others.

The first year is the crucial time for joining any group in the college life

As university students, we go through four stages in terms of focus, and the most crucial time for fitting into any group is during the first year. When we enter university, everyone looks for friends or a group to hang out with. By the second year, we feel this process is complete, so we struggle to find the best group to join, whether it is a circle, club, or a seminar. If we decide that the group we try out does not suit

us, we go on to another group.

That's why many people quit EPC during the first year as they felt they did not fit in. It is a pity as we approached them later on, we found out that many of them just did not have the courage to express their feelings toward people in the class, and missing the camp in autumn made them feel like they were excluded from the rest of the group, which was never true. However, as they were so afraid they would miss their chance to belong to any group in their university life, many of them quit EPC.

In the third year, our focus shifts into studies in the seminar, and we will not have so much time to study English, but we face a dilemma then as we become aware that tests such as TOEIC is quite important for our job hunting the following year. And in the 4th year, we get extremely busy job hunting and writing the graduation thesis. At Meiji, the campus is separated between the first two years and the last two years, and this separation might have a negative effect, as we do not get to realize until we go to the Surugadai Campus that we do not have that much more time to spend studying English.

Some practical tips for fostering group dynamics in L2 classrooms in general

Based on all this feedback and analysis by the students and my studies in group dynamics as well as my other classroom experiences, I have come up with a list of practical tips to our L2 classrooms in general, which would foster positive group dynamics:

1. Get students to know each other first in L1

In the beginning, spend more time on getting the students to know each other using Japanese, unless they are advanced learners, rather than giving them tasks in English.

2. A sharing or checking in activity is extremely helpful

In these activities, people share their physical and emotional states of the moment briefly in small groups. I share with the whole class first, and the rest of the class does their sharing in small groups. It is important to let students know that they do not need to tell anything that they feel uncomfortable with, and other members should listen to them with accepting attitudes. Depending on the level of the class or group, they can do this in Japanese in the beginning, and gradually shift into English perhaps with the teachers' guidance with the language they need to perform this. I have done these activities in every class including Group 2001, and it seems to help in making the atmosphere of the classes warmer, and also in improving attendance.

3. Schedule social activities and camps so everybody is able to attend

While the group is not yet cohesive, members could feel left out if their conflicting schedules are ignored. Having enough contact time with other members is the pre-requisite for any group to become and stay cohesive, and every effort should be made to make sure these longer contact opportunities are provided to everyone in the group.

4. Introduce group activities gradually after students get to know other group members

Students need to know others as people first, before they can comfortably participate in learning activities, especially when they are asked to perform possibly anxiety-provoking activities such as speaking to *strangers* about themselves in a foreign language, using body language they're not even used to doing in L1.

5. Help students organize and structure their group activities

Help students establish contact time outside class by providing time in class to exchange contact numbers, schedule meetings, etc. Establishing a group mailing list can be very useful for making announcements within the class.

5. If possible, schedule the classes right before lunch or diner time

This creates opportunities for people to linger on and spend time together while having meals without sacrificing their other activities and attending other classes.

6. Pay extra attention to group dynamics in first and second year classes in college

This is the time when students look rather intensely into finding a comfortable primary group to hang out in. If pay attention to group dynamics consciously and wisely, they might find this group right in your class! However, if you neglect the group dynamics and still try to make them work

together for a long period of time, the groups could either break up or become extremely uncooperative as they seek other more attractive groups, be it circles, clubs, or seminars, or you name it, to hang out in.

Summary

In this paper, my students in EPC Group 2001 and I have examined the factors affecting their motivational level over their first 3 years. We found that what most affected them was the dynamics of the group, and that this group suffered from primary tension for one full year, resulting in 10 of 24 members dropping out. This was followed by a miraculous *resurrection* after they participated in the student selection process when they encountered both confronting and understanding experiences with peers and teachers. Since that time, they have become a cohesive and autonomous learning group, initiating learning activities on their own and working extremely well and efficiently together.

In their third year, the students and I conducted collaborative research analyzing this group's developmental process based on a questionnaire survey and using terms applying to group formation processes in the discipline of group dynamics. Utilizing the results from their survey, they came up with their list of recommendations for teachers wishing to promote student group projects. We presented this in the Learner Development Forum at JALT 2004 in Nara, and in the following year it was presented as an independent presentation at JALT 2005 in Shizuoka by one of the former students, Takeshi Kohmoto, and myself adding my practical recommendations for teachers in L2 classrooms in general.

Our collaborative research suggests that in a L2 language classroom, special attention must first be paid to group dynamics, as it may create threatening and anxiety-provoking situations and could hinder the group formation process. As we suggested in our lists, it is most important to treat each other as people first, not as students or teachers, and to get to know each other well. Once we feel comfortable in our new groups, we can work much more efficiently and cooperatively, and we can become autonomous groups and individuals in the true sense.

References

Appendix: Three People's Experiences with EPC

1. Asako's Case

Asako has always been a very quiet person. She rarely speaks up in class. She had never done collaborative work before. She joined EPC because she wanted to keep the level she had attained prior to entering Meiji.

During the first semester, she gradually realized this was a very different course from what she was accustomed to. It was completely new to her. *This caused her to be both nervous and curious.* During the first semester, there were times when she thought of quitting EPC.

However, *the autumn camp in the first year was a turning point.* As she learned to integrate different opinions of people, rather than taking an "all or nothing" approach, she began to enjoy group work. And *being able to work well*

with other people built a foundation for her to put her energy into studying English and enjoying it.

In the fall semester in the second year, she was even a sub-leader for the Lion King production. Her work included schedule planning, choreography, and booking places for rehearsals. People around her (outside EPC) commented to her “You’ve been doing a big job!”

2. Jun (the leader)’s case

Jun had spent some years abroad, and was more fluent in English than most others in EPC. To the teachers, he appeared to maintain a low profile for most of the first year. However, he does not think so. He feels it was just a matter of being given opportunities.

He was somehow appointed leader around the end of first year. His policy was not to express his own opinions so much, but to make sure everyone, even the quietest in the group, would have a say, and to draw out everybody’s opinions. He also thinks once you get the group’s vector into one direction after working out the consensus well, the group can gain unbelievable power to execute things. He thinks that’s what might have happened to EPC people.

Although he remained a *general leader* for the whole year, they rotated the role of leader to different people in the second semester of the second year. He thinks that this was a good strategy. Everybody has some shining strengths and these opportunities reveal them. Even Asako became a great leader.

My senpais (senior members) were very kind to me. They would even run to me in times of trouble. On the other hand, I wanted to some day outperform them.

I put a lot of work into perfecting projects by using my computer skills. (Jun was the key person who edited the movie, “The Motive” among numerous other projects.) I wanted to reward my peers for making a neat record of their accomplishments and to encourage them to do an even better job the next time.

The miraculous success of EPC came from compassion of people for one another. People saw goodness in everybody. When somebody came back after a long absence from work, nobody criticized them, or even mentioned the fact. The selection process was particularly memorable as they let themselves express their true feelings about important issues, and there were even many tears. After all, we had nothing to hide from each other. Selecting a new member in the group was sensitive stuff. We were nervous about it as we were just becoming a “family”. It was still so fragile then, and we did not want to break it by letting the wrong person in. That’s why we got so serious and gave deep thoughts about what we really wanted from EPC, our “other family”. We ARE a family now, and this is such a secure one that we all feel we have a place to come back to any time.

When I look back into the last two years, the most fulfilling classes were the ones we planned and conducted ourselves. I was pretty much fed up with “systematic” classes from junior and high school days.

If I make any request for teachers, it is for them to allow students to do what they want when they come up to you for permission. To come to a group consensus to do something together needs enormous energy and motivation. Denying them a chance to do it would only blow out the little flame they had finally managed to ignite. So, teachers, please do

not turn them off!!

3. Takezo's case

Takezo lost his motivation in EPC in the first year. He quickly became lazy. He especially did not like the social aspects of it. He was aware that some people started “doing things” outside classes: celebrating people’s birthdays and so on. He wanted to have nothing to do with all this social stuff, so he stayed away. He was so disinterested in EPC that even as late as the beginning of the second year, he could not remember the name, EPC, after a long break, and was about to quit. When he spoke to Jun about it, he said he was necessary in EPC and wanted him to stay. Another member told him not to give it up so easily. Those words shifted something in him.

However, the biggest shift, or rather, a life-changing turning point, came during the selection process. As he had a very strong opinion against excluding people from EPC, he kept challenging other members who had opposing opinions. He was very persistent about it, and this let him express himself fully in the group for the first time. He felt that he finally was recognized as a member, and felt good being trusted so much as to let him express his opinions about such an important matter in the university.

He changed radically from that time, and has been fully committed to EPC and its people ever since. Being inspired by some EPC graduates, he applied for the extremely competitive Japan-American Student Conference, and was accepted. He says his experience in EPC of using English so much has helped him greatly in debates and in reading and

writing a lot of materials. Now he is working hard to become a diplomat. As he has very supportive friends from EPC, he feels secure even when he is doing a challenging task, and not too nervous. He believes that without participating in the 20-hour-long discussions following the selection interviews, his life could have been much different and boring.