

## *Newsletter No. 10*

### Workshop in February

#### “Modulating Motivational Group Dynamics”

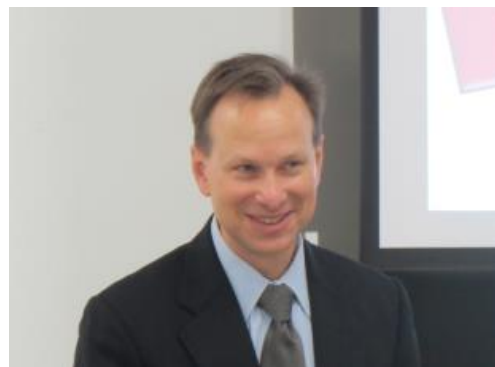
**Presenter:** Joseph Falout (Nihon University)

**Date:** February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, 10:30-14:30

**Venue:** Nagoya NSC College, Room A-31

**Abstract:**

Teachers using learner-centered approaches understand that their students cannot use English together without good group dynamics in the classroom. Students, however, may not always try to get along. Yet having a sense of positive classroom atmosphere acts as a base upon which students build confidence in speaking English, interest in English-speaking friendships and cultures, and vision as future speakers of English. How to encourage students to care about each other and work well together? In this workshop we will practice improving and maintaining motivational group dynamics through whole-class improvisation games, cooperative challenges, and peer-generated ideals of prosocial peer learning support.



**The number of participants:** 20

#### 1. Interesting activities you might want to use in your class. Why?

- Passing gestures. It is useful to introduce CLT into the classroom, because it is the first step of communication.
- ‘I take the train with my friend’ activity. I think I might make use of this activity when I teach key sentences.
- The circular conversation and improv activities. They may help my students to understand conversation is not only in language.
- I like the improv activities a lot. I never thought about ways to improve non-verbal communication skills. Today at first, I didn’t understand the point of the activity but after trying them myself, I understood.
- Almost all activities in a circle with moving and interaction with others – they involve all the students and make them active, so they are useful as warm-up activities and ice breaking.



## 2. What you learned from today's workshop

- How to integrate problem solving or other skills into the tasks in order to develop students' creative, critical or logical thinking.
- I learned how group dynamics work and how to have positive motivational classroom atmosphere. We certainly learned very useful and effective ways of getting students engaged in the classroom.
- I liked Uri Alon's line in his TED Talk that research doesn't necessarily have to be about finding answers to specific questions, but rather it can be something that has its own creative worth.
- Creating fun positive atmosphere is very important to motivate students. It was so much fun to learn lots of activities. I love your instructions with lots of nonverbal gesture.
- I'd like to have a class in a circular seating style. I'm sure today's activities make the students feel relaxed and involved in and happy.

## 3. Questions and Answers

### *Q (1) What types of surveys do you give to learn about your students' motivation?*

A: There are two basic types: formal and informal. I use informal surveys more frequently throughout each semester than formal surveys, and more for getting feedback on my teaching than for publishing the research, although such survey data can be designed to be included for formal research too. My informal surveys use two or three key open-ended questions intended to help students reflect on their learning, and to help me understand the students themselves and their reactions to the teaching activities and approach for each course I teach. The purpose is to take a moment to think about improving what we are doing. For example, at regular intervals during a long project, I ask students how they are preparing themselves for different stages in the project, what they might do to prepare for the next stage, and what they would like to tell me—tell me anything they would like to—about doing the project.



Additionally, around the middle of the semester, students receive the ideal teacher prompt, which asks them what they would like from their English teachers to help them learn better and more enjoyably (see Fukuda, Fukuda, Falout, & Murphey, 2017). I compile their answers from each class anonymously onto one sheet of paper, and loop it back to the class (i.e., give each student a copy of the list of answers). Then with small group activities or whole-class discussions or both, students let me know what they like in general, and what they would like to try or see changed in our class specifically. Often the same classes have conflicting ideas (e.g., some students want an English-only class, while others want Japanese language support), and sometimes there is a negotiation between the students and me about how to improve the class or try something different. This procedure has helped me to connect with students as people, helping us all recognize that they are not pawns on a game board for me to push around, but that we are players in the game worthy of mutual respect. It also informs and inspires me to experiment with unexpected, even novel, teaching activities or approaches that, if they work well enough, can become incorporated as regular features of future classes.

One simple informal survey is known as an exit slip, which starts as a small blank piece of paper given to each student. At the end of each class period, students take a moment to fill in their thoughts about the class they just experienced, offering the teacher any kind of feedback, positive or negative, or any message they want. Students can choose to hand in their exit slips with or without their names on them, or even choose to keep their exit slips to themselves. To sum up, frequent informal surveys help teachers to learn about their students' motivations as specifically situated within each class, change their teaching, and in turn increase their students' motivations to learn.

I use formal surveys less for understanding my students' motivations in specific classes, and more for investigations that help me test or check proposed principles about how students' motivations work in general. The questionnaire that I have been using the most comes from the motivational framework called present communities of imagining (PCOIz; Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, 2012). The PCOIz survey uses Likert-style agreement scales for students' responses. It was developed by my research team to measure second language (L2) motivational levels involving past selves (academic emotional baggage), present selves (investment or heart put into learning), and future selves (expectations and dreams). Our findings (e.g., Fukada, Murphey, Falout, & Fukuda, 2017; Fukada, Fukada, Falout, & Murphey, in preses) are that: (1) these three mind-time frames of learning motivation need to be in balance or harmony with each other for optimal motivational effect on an individual's behaviors relating to action-taking and commitment to learning, (2) each mind-time frame of motivation of each individual is socially constructed on a continual basis, meaning that classroom interactions can change an individual student's motivations for better or worse, and (3) over the span of a 15-week semester, these motivations of individuals can improve in direct proportion to the kind of social learning support effected by ideal classmates interventions (for more explanations about ideal classmates interventions, continue reading onward, or see Fukuda, Fukada, Falout, & Murphey, in press).

***Q (2) The relationships in my class were so terrible. Students didn't do pair/group work. I never thought that English classes can help such problems. When I come across such class again, I'll try to get them to learn to make good relationships in the class. Any advice?***

A: Perhaps you have seen groups of students gathering readily to do something without much, if any, direct guidance from any teacher or adult. Young people seem to know naturally how to cooperate in complex social activities, such as setting up a volleyball net and playing a game, or setting up a snack table and hosting a party. Sometimes adult supervision or teacher guidance is necessary, but very often young people can teach each other to do the things they want to do together, with minimum impediments. So I ask myself, "What is stopping students from engaging in pair or group work in the English classroom? Why aren't they giving something that is fun and easy just a little try? Why aren't they enjoying themselves?"



Common answers from teachers and teaching textbooks are that students may not be familiar with the activities,

and thus need clear directions from the teacher about how to do the activities. Additionally, many activities need to be scaffolded, which means they need to be done in smaller, easier steps at first, and then built up gradually into the full thing. This all may be true. My guess, however, is that there is more happening than simply unfamiliarity with language learning activities. Student silence and resistance (King, 2013) also stems from them not wanting to do the activities, not even the fun and easy activities. Why does it get this way?

Students may not be culturally or emotionally ready to jump into doing language learning activities with others, and worse, doing so in front of their peers. They feel embarrassed. They fear making mistakes. It's not cool. Their friends make fun of them. No one wants to make a fool of themselves, especially not in front of peers who may be sharing classes with them for weeks and months to come.

Students first need to feel free from negative social recourse. They need to be familiar and relaxed with each other, and ready to mutually give permission to make mistakes—that is, both English-related mistakes and mistakes related to breaking with social mores. They also need to think what they are doing is valuable and desirable. What makes playing volleyball cool to them? What makes holding a party socially acceptable to them? In these cases, there are enough shared positive social cues, nonverbal and subconscious, that these activities get social buy-in from most everyone. The challenge for the language teacher, then, is in getting students culturally and emotionally prepared to start doing language learning activities together.

The following suggestions are primarily for helping students and teacher all become accustomed to each other first, making the personal connections that can build and maintain trust, empathy, and care for each other. Once a firm base of interpersonal relationships has been established, then from this point forward students feel safe to venture out and try new things. They are then more agreeable to being socialized into feeling and believing what they are doing together in class is valuable and desirable to do.

### ***Circular seating***

An interactive classroom that prioritizes groupwork means students are provided: ready ambulatories for approaching each other and open spaces in which to engage, flexibility in table clustering and reconfigurations of clusters, chairs that can be rolled or picked up and placed according to changing table configurations or seating arrangements, and other mobile furniture or features, such as small whiteboards on wheels (Falout, 2010; Greer, 2013). Circular or semi-circular seating promotes a positive classroom community (Falout, 2014), although these seating configurations are rarely seen in practice due to architectural, cultural, and administrative constraints. For teachers hoping to overcome such challenges, the main question can be, as Greer (2013) explains, “how to make your voice heard in matters of educational planning, such as classroom design” (p. 51). Greer answered this question, for his own situation anyway, by finding an approachable colleague who was sympathetic to the request for dedicating just one classroom out of many for redesigning to contain many of the classroom features for groupwork mentioned above. (For more information about the why's and how's of circular seating, see Falout, 2014.)



### ***Mix students regularly***

Changing pairings and groupings of students frequently during every class helps students to become familiar with all classmates, and it minimizes time spent in unfruitful pairings (not everyone gets along), while maximizing chances of becoming friendly with as many classmates as possible and even making friends. It goes without saying that friendliness is essential to fostering good group dynamics. For learning how to get everyone moving in and out of pairs and groups, I am sorry to say that I cannot direct you to one simple resource. But you may wish to search through the literature on communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, and cooperative learning.

Unfortunately, publications that clearly illustrate practical procedures for orchestrating pair and groupwork for L2-learning, as well as research involving the effects of such procedures, seems wanting. One such rare example of both comes from Smith and Price-Jones (2009), who put forward a clear procedure, which can be done in oversized classes with rank-and-file seating, to get students moving in rotational pairs along two opposing lines that they call “train tracks.” In addition to learning discrete language features, students reported gains in fluency, and they learned a lot about each other.

### ***Improvisation games***

Improvisation games have recently become my favorite way of getting students to: relax, loosen up, and open up to each other; warm up and experiment with verbal and nonverbal communicative exchanges; feel empathy toward individuals; feel like being together in a group; get into a cooperative mindset; give each other tacit permission to dare to be different; become playful; and display their own personal skills, originality, and creativity in the ways they wish (within the boundaries of the rules of the particular game in play), which means finding their own voice, figuratively and literally. I am still searching for and developing activities that work best for me and my students, and you might do the same by checking books specifically about improvisation games, or searching in YouTube for videos such as “Circle Up: Improv.”

The potential applicability appears versatile and powerful: improvisation games can be used as ice breakers, scaffolding activities, and focus-on-form practice. Also, any type of mirroring improvisation is perfect for the communicative language classroom as it teaches students to pay attention to each other closely, move and speak slowly, and watch and listen carefully. (For more on the power of improvisation as an exercise in building relationships, see Alda, 2017.)



### ***Showcase non-English skills***

Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. It feels bad when our weaknesses are exposed, and good when our strengths are recognized and applauded. Before students begin teaching each other through communicative



language practice, something they may not be so good at or familiar with, why not have students teaching each other their favorite things? With pairs doing mirroring improvisation, for example, they can teach each other how to sing a song, dance a hip hop step, or make a funny pose. Without mirroring, small groups in circles can try teaching similar things, with each student taking one turn at a time as the “teacher” and the other circle members following along. Whatever they are good at, anything goes (provided it is safe): magic tricks, sports-related bodily moves or techniques, or foreign languages other than English!



### ***Use names often***

Most everyone feels good when they hear their own name in a friendly voice. It is the sound of personal recognition and acceptance. Of course teachers already know this and try to have all student names memorized. But do the students use each other’s names often? I make sure that a space is given in all conversation templates so that students are frequently giving, shadowing, and using each other’s names in a friendly way. I also sometimes have a surprise “quiz” (meaning it is not actually graded) or a game (one point for each correct name) early in the semester to see how many names students can give to the faces they see sitting around them in the class circle. Simply put, people feel closer together when using each other’s names.

### ***Praise positives with specificity***

The rule of thumb is to praise the behaviors that you wish to promote in your classes. So praise the prosocial behaviors that you like and do it as soon as you see them arise. Effective praise means that it is given genuinely, specifically, and more-or-less privately. Suppose you notice one day that a particular student is adept at carefully listening to her partners, tell her when she is rotating on to another pairing or before she leaves the class. Say her name and explicitly describe this social skill she is performing well on. For example: “Emiko, I liked the way you were shadowing Takashi’s opinions just now.” Or you might catch a student just before exiting the classroom and say to her, “Yumiko, you were good at speaking slowly when spelling out words to your partners today.” Try this praising style during each class with as many students you can.



### ***Provide choices***

Students given choices are students empowered. There are many ways to create spaces for choices. Within allowable parameters, offer students choices in what they want to do and say in class, on what and how much they want to write to submit, and for how much time they wish to do their homework. Choices can be open-ended (e.g., to what degree or effect) or closed-ended (e.g., choice A or B). Students will feel less pressure and they will be freer to be themselves. So you might try giving students choices or you might not; it’s your choice.

### ***Pathway thinking phrasing***

The words you use when speaking to others (or just to yourself) changes the way both they and you think. Closed-minded thinking phrases includes those such as “You must,” “You have to,” and “You need to.” Using these or similar phrases sends up emotional barriers and shuts out creative thinking. Conversely, using pathway thinking phrases—“You might,” “You could,” or “You can”—opens up possibilities, limits the pressures felt, allows people to feel hope (e.g., Snyder, 2000), and frees the flow of thoughts to create multiple scenarios and choices for future action.

So when directing students as to what to do, you might sometimes back off on the pressures, and put on a little possibilities that students might consider. Use the pathway thinking phrases, in English or Japanese, to allow students the flexibility in determining their own pathways in finishing your classes and in living their lives. This is especially important for solving problems, academically or behaviorally, when having talks with students. Students might come up with better solutions to their own problems if they have some say in it. Teachers, too, might remind themselves that there are times where situations are not really “have to” situations. Pathway thinking words helps people think up multiple possible solutions as a set of options to problems, from among which they can then select their preferred way to go. Feeling less like being controlled by others and more like being in control of themselves, students and teachers might have the agency it takes to proactively make their classroom experiences ideal.

### ***Ideal classmates priming***

Words heard from peers can influence students more than those from the teacher. Believe it or not, students actually want to speak English, but their desires remain private and their fears take over, making them clam up. They falsely think no one else want to speak English. But when students learn from their classmates about these common true desires, they become emboldened and committed to trying harder in class to speak English together. Moreover, they then have the metacognitive tools to do so (Davis, 2018).



With ideal classmates priming (Fukuda et al., in press), the teacher starts by using the ideal classmates prompt, which asks each student to imagine a group of students helping each other learn and speak English enjoyably together, and then write about how they are able to do it. Students individually write their own answers in English, Japanese, or both. Usually students express desire to speak English together and give excellent advice on helping each other do it. The teacher collects and compiles the answers into an anonymous list, and then loops back this list to all class members. Students can see for themselves what their classmates are thinking. This completes the initial stage of priming, but it can be followed up by various reminders of how to help each other speak English better and more enjoyably: classroom posters, desktop pop-up signs, focus-on-form pair exchange (works well by giving advice through pathway thinking phrasing), or hand-held wish cards (e.g., Davis, 2018; Murphey & Iswanti, 2014; Sampson, 2018).

### ***Looping it back***

The above activity loops back ideas of how students might become ideal classmates for each other. As long as students are aware beforehand how their information will be used and allowed to option out, anything else can be compiled likewise and anonymously looped back to the whole class: responses from formal and informal surveys, homework, and so forth. Giving feedback to a class-group about the group's thoughts and feelings promotes and reinforces further prosocial efforts, specifically those related to ways of learning English better, more enjoyably, and more cooperatively (Falout, Murphey, Fukuda, & Fukuda, 2016). This looping process is formally known as Critical Participatory Looping (Murphey & Falout, 2010), which you might try not only for building good group dynamics, but for action research.



***Q (3) One of my students doesn't show any interest in my English class. Her attitude has a negative effect on the whole class even though other students are motivated. I had a talk with her, but she hasn't changed. What should I do?***

A: The dark side of group dynamics is that one student can negatively influence the rest of the class-group. Assuming teachers have tried all the things listed above, giving options and advice using pathway thinking phrasing (in the student's L2 or mother tongue), how else might we teachers respond to students who are uninterested, disruptive, and disrespectful?

Step back and take a breath. Do not allow your own negative emotions to take over your decisions (for emotional self-regulation for teachers, see Gkonou, Dewaele, & King, in press). And then remind yourself: for students who had lost their motivation (demotivation) to learn English, the most common way that they regained it (remotivation) was through displays of care and compassion for their struggles by significant people to them, such as close family members and caring teachers (Falout, Murphey, Fukuda, & Trovela, 2013). Problem-causing students are usually well-aware of the disturbances they are causing, and the source of the troubles may have little to nothing to do with your class. There may be outside pressures, or troubles at home. This is outside of your domain, but you can certainly focus on what happens in your class. You might try asking the students themselves how they might prevent or limit the problems they are bringing to class. But even before that, you might start simply with getting to know the student better.

You might not start by addressing the problem, but by addressing the person, meaning to give recognition to the student as someone who matters and acknowledging the student's perspectives. You might ask the student how he or she feels about English in general or the classwork specifically. You might not ask anything, just wait for the student to begin speaking. Once the student starts talking, now it is your turn to listen without judgement. Shadow the student's own words back to the student, making sure that you are listening and connecting. When sensing your genuine empathy, the student will start feeling safe with you and maybe open



up by sharing what he or she is feeling. Recognize the feelings by explicitly saying what they are. Try to stay quiet and wait for the student to talk. At intervals you may summarize what the student is telling you. You may not ever get to addressing the problem specifically at all. Just getting to know the student a little better with this approach can have a sea change effect in the way the student behaves in class. This approach has resulted in surprising transformations in my students' attitudes and actions, changing problem-causing behaviors into prosocial-peer-learning-support engagement (PPLS engagement; Fukuda et al., in press). (Voss & Raz, 2016, explain this approach much further with a lot of examples, and although this book's title is provocative and may seem like a strange recommendation for teachers, it mainly is a book about communicating better with anyone around you.)

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## **Workshop in February (AR Discussion)**

**Date:** February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020, 15:00-17:00

**Venue:** Nagoya NSC College, Room A-51

**Title:** Group discussion on action research

**Advisers:** Kazuyoshi Sato, Duane Kindt, Juanita Heigham (NUFS)

**The number of participants:** 5

