

Introduction to the Special Issue: Group Dynamics in the Second/Foreign Language Classroom

Tomohito Hiromori^a, Glen Poupore^b, and Makoto Mitsugi^c

^a Meiji University, Japan; ^b Minnesota State University, USA; ^c Otaru University of Commerce, Japan.

INTRODUCTION

The study of group dynamics in second and foreign language (L2) classrooms has gained increasing attention in recent years, as both researchers and educators recognize the significant impact that group interactions have on student engagement and language learning outcomes (e.g., Fukada et al., 2019, 2022; Hiromori, 2024; Leeming, 2020, 2024; Leeming & Harris, 2025; Mitsugi et al., 2024; Murphey et al., 2021; Poupore, 2016, 2018; Sato & Viveros, 2016; Sato et al., 2025; Tanaka, 2022, 2025). While individual psychological processes (e.g., motivation, anxiety, learner beliefs, self-efficacy, willingness to communicate) have been extensively researched, less attention has been given to the influence of the classroom environment—specifically, how group dynamics shape the overall language learning experience. This special issue (SI) seeks to address this gap by providing a platform for research that explores the complex psychological mechanisms at play within group interactions in L2 learning contexts.

Historically rooted in social psychology, group dynamics encompasses a wide range of research themes but can be broadly defined as “the field of psychology devoted to the study of groups and group processes” (American Psychological Association, 2018, para. 1). In the context of second language acquisition (SLA), Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) identified group dynamics as a crucial factor in shaping classroom culture and influencing learning outcomes, describing it as “probably one of the most—if not the most—useful sub-disciplines” (p. 1) for supporting language teachers.

However, despite their assertion, subsequent studies have not thoroughly examined the topic. Philp et al. (2013) noted that relatively few studies have investigated the dynamics of pairs and groups in classrooms. Similarly, Gkonou et al. (2018) pointed out that while many teachers acknowledge the importance of classroom culture and group dynamics, research on the subject remains sparse. One plausible factor is that learning in group settings occurs in a dynamic environment where various factors interact in complex ways (Forsyth, 2018). Designing effective pedagogies and interventions that account for group dynamics requires the elaboration of theories and methodologies to deeply understand the group’s growth process as a complex system and to analyze how the behaviors and psychology of learners impact both the system and the group learning process (Hiver et al., 2022). This SI responds to this ongoing need by expanding the scope of research on group dynamics in L2 classroom settings.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Conceptual Article

The SI opens with **Poupore’s** conceptual and historical overview, which examines the theoretical framing and research of group dynamics in L2 educational contexts. While previous conceptual papers exist (Fukada et al., 2019; Murphey et al., 2021), Poupore’s overview provides a more detailed and up-to-date analysis. Poupore begins

by outlining a rationale for studying L2 group dynamics. Concurring with evolutionary anthropologists on the human capacity for social cooperation, he highlights the cognitive, affective, social, and language acquisitional benefits that can emerge from positive social dynamics. Following this, he provides clarifying definitions of key constructs: group, group dynamics, and group work dynamics. From a theoretical and practical perspective, Poupore then presents key features identified in the literature that foster positive group dynamics. This is followed by an empirical review which summarizes key studies—from the foundational work of Clément et al. (1994) to the increasing volume of recent investigations. Poupore divides this review into two distinct sections: studies framed within a motivational perspective and those framed within an engagement perspective, the latter of which has recently gained significant attention. Through this review, Poupore shows how varied the research has been, both methodologically and topically. Specific focuses include group cohesiveness, group norms, group formation, teacher-student relationships, peer influence, group work dynamics, student leadership, and group-related directed motivational currents (DMCs). Poupore concludes the paper by outlining exciting avenues for future research.

Research Articles

Opening this collection of research articles is **Leeming**'s study on group work in L2 classrooms, which offers educators and researchers clear insights into the question “what makes a leader?” and serves as a catalyst for rethinking how leadership should be enacted in group work. This study addresses a noted gap in longitudinal qualitative research on L2 classroom group dynamics, focusing in particular on emergent leadership. Specifically, a single fixed-membership group of four students is followed over one semester (14 weeks). The analysis traces the emergent leadership process, peer recognition of the leader, and their reflection in group interaction and engagement, integrating quantitative indicators, qualitative coding of recorded interaction, and interview data. The findings revealed that leadership is enacted not through

dominance but through high-quality contributions and peer support, and that both leadership and learner engagement is established early in the semester and remain relatively stable thereafter. Drawing on a rich longitudinal analysis that attends to qualitative aspects such as the quality of leaders' contributions and supportive behaviors, the study advances understanding of the relationship between leadership stability and learner individual-difference variables.

Another study that supplements the longitudinal literature on leadership in L2 group work is by **Mitsugi, Hiromori, and Yoshimura**. This study is distinctive in that it examines both assigned and emergent leaders within the same longitudinal framework. Adopting a Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) perspective, it investigates how these two leadership types shape the development of group dynamics and learner engagement, as well as the mediating role of leadership between them. Consequently, groups with assigned leaders converge early on to a positive attractor state, displaying stability in both group dynamics and learner engagement. By contrast, groups with emergent leaders require more time to self-organize, with leadership gradually emerging and engagement stabilizing. This study demonstrates that leadership in L2 group work is not a fixed trait; rather, it evolves through interaction and acts as a catalyst that enhances the quality of collaborative learning. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study renders the process visible. On this basis, it proposes context-dependent strategies for deploying assigned leaders and emergent leaders according to task specifications and group composition, thereby contributing to both research and pedagogy.

Sampson and Machi conducted a qualitative, micro-analytic case study focused on four Japanese university English learners participating in a group work discussion. This group was selected from a larger, semester-long teacher-practitioner study, which had used video recordings and learner journals. The group was chosen for detailed investigation because data showed they experienced positive emotions during the task, specifically excitement, enjoyment, interest, and fun. The researchers analyzed the interaction using a 'multimodal representation' method, which captured interactional

details down to the millisecond. This approach combined detailed notetaking, transcription of both linguistic (words) and extralinguistic (body language, tone) behaviors, soundwave analysis, and pictorial displays. This process yielded a comprehensive audio-visual record of both what the students said and how they said it. This analysis revealed what Sampson and Machi term a ‘dynamic emotionality of togetherness’ that bonded the group. They found this emotionality was driven by three key behavioral patterns: a shift from English to a Japanese conversational style, the activation of shared knowledge, and laughter. Their study provides a robust model for better understanding the emergence of group emotion.

Nitta and Nakatsuhara investigate dyadic L2 interaction through a CDST lens, addressing the lack of attention paid to interactional processes in conventional TBLT research. Treating the presence or absence of three minutes of pre-task planning as an initial condition that yields divergent turn-taking trajectories, they highlight a “butterfly effect” from small differences in starting states. Conversation Analysis and turn-taking dynamics are used to explore these patterns. The findings show that pre-task planning encourages task-oriented behavior, which tends to involve defensive communication and passive listening. In contrast, the non-planning condition promotes a group-maintenance orientation, fostering co-construction, enjoyment and a shared sense of security. This study helps us better understand what makes a high-quality conversation as it unfolds in real time. It also offers useful insights for designing tasks that balance the amount of language produced with the depth and quality of shared interaction.

The special issue closes with a study by **Fukuda, Fukada, Munezane, Falout, and Murphey** examining a pedagogical intervention for Japanese university English learners called ‘ideal classmates priming.’ This intervention involves having students describe their ideal L2 classmates early in the semester. These responses are then anonymously shared and discussed to help establish positive group norms. This method had already been validated as an effective tool for boosting motivation and prosocial engagement in Japanese university English classrooms (Fukuda et al.,

2021; Murphey et al., 2014). This new study, however, aimed to compare the intervention's effectiveness before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers wanted to see if the period of isolated learning had altered the psychological or motivational makeup of students now returning to face-to-face classes. Using quantitative longitudinal measurements and qualitative analyses, the study found that the intervention continues to have significant positive effects. It still fosters supportive and motivating group dynamics, making learners more willing to engage with each other and participate in English.

The six papers discussed above each shed light on the psychological dimensions and significance of group dynamics in language learning, approached from a variety of theoretical and methodological angles. What unites them conceptually is their shared endeavor to integrate a group-level lens into established traditions of motivation and SLA research, thereby bridging the long-standing divide between individual and social perspectives. Empirically, the studies employ an impressive range of methodological designs—from longitudinal and multimodal approaches to experimental interventions—capturing the inherently complex, dynamic, and situated nature of classroom group processes.

A recurring and particularly powerful theme emerging across the papers is learner engagement. Now widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct incorporating cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social aspects, engagement has become a central indicator of meaningful and sustained participation in learning (Hiver et al., 2024; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Importantly, these studies move beyond viewing engagement as an individual attribute to reveal it as a relational, co-constructed phenomenon that arises through learners' interaction and collaboration. In doing so, they provide rich insights into how motivation and engagement are dynamically enacted within group contexts.

Collectively, the contributions in this SI illustrate both theoretical expansion and methodological innovation in the study of group dynamics, while reaffirming the essential role of the social dimension in shaping language learning experiences.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research on group dynamics is only now entering a stage of full development, with further growth and refinement expected in the coming years. First, there is a need for continued longitudinal and comprehensive research. As Hiver et al. (2021) have shown, certain nonlinear changes and critical points become visible only when interactions within a group are examined over time. By investigating session-by-session fluctuations and gradual processes of self-organization—such as those demonstrated in this SI—across a wider range of contexts, researchers can move toward constructing a generalizable model of group phenomena. For instance, by extending longitudinal analyses beyond university classrooms to include secondary education or online learning environments, it may be possible to uncover characteristics that differ according to educational level or learning context.

At the same time, all studies in this SI are situated in Japanese EFL contexts. This focus reflects the depth of classroom-based research on group dynamics in Japan and offers insights into how group processes unfold over time within relatively stable instructional settings. While grounded in a specific context, the issues addressed here resonate with broader discussions of group dynamics in language learning, and we hope that this collection will encourage further research across diverse educational contexts.

Second, further advancement of interdisciplinary approaches is highly desirable. Group dynamics is a field closely connected to psychology and sociology, and promising directions include quantifying interpersonal patterns in classrooms using social network analysis or measuring synchronization during collaboration through neuroscientific and physiological methods (e.g., Gilman et al., 2022; Gordon, 2025; Terry & Bayley, 2024). Actively incorporating methods from other disciplines can provide objective evidence for mechanisms such as “emotion contagion” within groups. Moreover, while this SI has focused primarily on learners, it is also essential to explore the roles of teacher leadership and overall classroom culture, though studies such as Sampson (2016) and Pinner (2019) have begun to address these aspects. Future work

should integrate macro-level perspectives, examining how teachers' behaviors and classroom management policies influence group dynamics, and how school or sociocultural factors shape learners' collaborative attitudes.

Third, future research should aim to measure the concrete effects of group dynamics on language acquisition. As demonstrated in this SI, positive group dynamics can enhance learners' motivation and engagement; however, further evidence is needed to clarify the extent to which these dynamics ultimately contribute to L2 attainment—such as improvements in conversational ability or vocabulary growth. For example, Poupore (2016) found that the more collaborative the group work atmosphere, the greater the amount of language production during tasks and the higher the level of self-reported motivation. Building on such findings, future studies could examine the links between group dynamics and long-term learning outcomes (e.g., test performance or skill proficiency), thereby providing clearer evidence of the educational impact of group dynamics research.

In conclusion, this SI highlights both the current state and the future potential of group dynamics research in L2 education. The question posed by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003)—“How can we maintain positive interpersonal relationships in the classroom and enhance learning outcomes?”—has, after two decades, evolved into new directions through the integration of complex dynamic systems theory and positive psychology. Alongside the movement led by Mercer and MacIntyre toward fostering positive classroom environments (e.g., MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2016), group phenomena in language classrooms are becoming a central theme in SLA research. Yet, as the papers in this issue reveal, this field is still in its formative stage, with many questions remaining unanswered. Precisely for that reason, we hope that the theoretical and empirical insights offered here will inspire further studies to shed light on the “invisible power of groups” in L2 learning. Through the lens of group dynamics, new horizons in language education are beginning to unfold—this SI marks one important step in that ongoing journey.

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