

IMPROVING MOTIVATION IN ORAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOMS IN JAPAN: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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Introduction

This article reports on an action research project that aimed to address the problem of low student motivation in my own (Japanese high school) classroom. Following the four action research phases set out by Kemmis and McTaggart (1989), a plan was put into action. Throughout the course a range of activities were undertaken to promote increased motivation. Feedback in the form of a numbers rating form was collected after each activity in class to gauge the immediate reaction to each new activity presented. Longer-term changes in the students' language learning attitudes and motivation were also measured using a questionnaire administered twice, once for baseline data, and again at the end of the term.

The issue of motivation in language education in Japan was brought to the forefront in 1975 by Hiraizumi, a member of the House of Councillors in Japan at that time (cited in Oda-Tanaka and Tanaka 1995). In a report entitled 'Current situation of foreign language education and some directions for improvement – a tentative plan', he claimed that:

There are three reasons for the ineffective language teaching: the first is that students are not well-motivated to study a foreign language because they do not need it in their daily life, but study it only to pass entrance examinations. The second reason is the level of 'English to be tested' is too high. The third reason is that the methods for teaching English, which is structurally quite different from Japanese, are ineffective.

(Oda-Tanaka and Tanaka 1995: 123).

Dörnyei (1998: 117) points out that 'motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning'. The students in my classes, like many EFL students throughout the world, lacked enthusiasm for the activities I used, showing little or no interest in participating unless I stood right over them. Although I felt I could do little to influence the effect of students' external sources of motivation (or

lack of it), it seemed to me that if I could increase their enjoyment of and interest in English classes on an activity-by-activity basis I might be able to regularly create better conditions for successful learning to occur. In addition, I hoped that by finding ways of making classes more engaging, the students' general attitude towards English as a school subject would improve, and further long-term motivational benefits would thus be gained. For myself, my professional understanding would benefit as I would gain greater insight into the processes involved in motivating reluctant students, and I hoped that in reporting the project other teachers would gain ideas and insights into how to tackle similar problems in their own classrooms.

The immediate concern, therefore, was to get the initial interest of my uninterested students. Following the four action research phases set out by Kemmis and McTaggart (1989), I set out to discover what would motivate those students who were unmotivated to learn in my classroom by asking the questions, 'Can student motivation be increased in my classroom?' and 'If so, what is it that increases my students' motivation? Finding answers to these questions was expected to have a direct bearing on the enhancement of learning in my English classes.

The students

I carried out my research with third year high school students, aged seventeen and eighteen years old, who were taking the class known as Oral Communication II. There are three Oral Communication II classes: liberal arts class A (L3-A); liberal arts class B (L3-B), and the general course class (G3). The L3-A class consisted of nineteen students (fifteen girls and four boys) who tested as the top 50% in English achievement tests out of all of the third year liberal arts course students at the high school. The L3-B class was made up of eighteen students (sixteen boys and two girls) who tested as the lower 50% in English out of all of the third year liberal arts course students at the school. Finally, the G3 class consisted of all 34 third year students (23 boys and eleven girls) enrolled in the general course at the school. The general course students usually enter the high school with a lower academic record from their junior high school days than those in the liberal arts course, and are less likely to be preparing to enter universities or colleges.

Methods

For practical reasons (a large number of students, one researcher, limited time), the methods chosen for data collection consisted of self-report questionnaires administered to the students at the beginning and at the end of the second term and immediate feedback collected after each new activity was introduced during the term. The first questionnaire, based on Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery or AMTB (Gardner 1985: 177–84, cited in Williams and Burden 1997), was designed to elicit information regarding each student's intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and attitude toward language learning (see Appendix 1). The questionnaire instructions and questions were presented in both English and Japanese to aid understanding.

The second questionnaire was designed to elicit the students' level of interest in the activities that had been done in Oral Communication II class during the first term (see Appendix 2). Williams and Burden (1997:125) state that 'if we can identify those activities that individuals consider important to them personally, it may be possible to use this information to increase their motivation towards other activities'. Students rated the activities on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being very boring and 5 being very interesting). The questionnaire was in both English and Japanese for optimum understanding. The questionnaire also included space for students to list the activities that they would definitely like to do again, and those they would definitely not want to do again. Finally, students could list any activities that we had not done in class that they would like to try.

New activities that were introduced during the second term were evaluated immediately after each activity was done in class on the same one to five scale but using small 'post-it' memo notes that were distributed after each activity. The students were asked to write a number between one and five (one being 'very boring' on up to five being 'very interesting') on the post-it note, which I then collected to be tallied after class. At the end of term two, the students completed a questionnaire that allowed them to choose which, if any, of the activities they would definitely want to do again and those which they would definitely not want to do again (Appendix 3).

Finally, the motivation questionnaire (Appendix 1) was administered again at the end of the second term to see if any change had taken place in the students' motivation after the three and a half month term.

First term activities

Upon analysis of the students' responses to the first term's activities (including tests) and reflection upon the behavior exhibited up to that point in each class, I considered new activities for the second term. I made an effort to keep activities that scored high on the students' interest scale and cut or rethought activities that scored low. Nunan (1989:127) points out that 'it is important that classroom research build on what is currently happening rather than replacing it with ideas and practices which may actually be alien to the teacher'. With this in mind, I tried to present activities that were practical and familiar to myself. The activities chosen by students as those they would definitely like to do again (Figure 1) or definitely not like to do again (Figure 2) are shown below. A list of the first term activities can be seen in Table 1 below.

- 1. Studying from the textbook.
- 2. Taking digital pictures and providing information for a computer log. (See Appendix 4.)
- 3. Listening to English songs.
- 4. Filling in the missing song lyrics (cloze listening activities).
- 5. Looking at an old yearbook to learn the English names of clubs and teams.
- 6. Playing games (English ping pong, bingo).
- 7. Getting stickers for winning games.
- 8. Doing the final interview test.
- 9. Taking the final listening test.
- 10. Watching English videos.

Table 1: Term 1 Activities

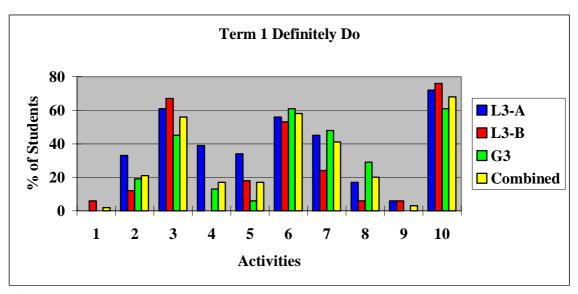


Figure 1

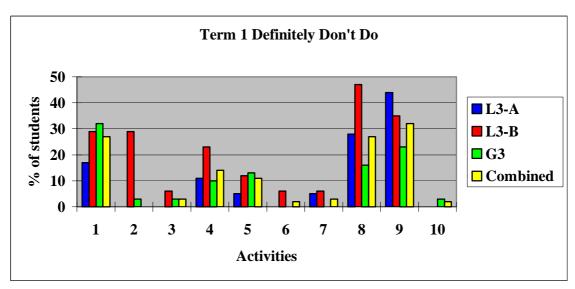


Figure 2

Figure 1 shows that more than 50% of the students in all of the classes combined found activities 3, 6 and 10 to be activities they would definitely want to do again. These activities were listening to English songs, playing games, and watching English videos. More than 40% of the students liked getting stickers for winning games.

This posed the problem of how to get the students to learn when the activities they preferred were less than academic. I had witnessed students sleeping through videos and chattering through songs that I played for them. Games got their attention, but seldom had anything specifically to do with the curriculum that must be taught.

The three most highly rated 'definitely don't want to do again' activities (Figure 2) included using the textbook, taking the final interview test, and taking the final listening test.

Second term activities

The activities undertaken during term two can be found in Table 2 below.

- 1. Participation points for bringing your textbook and pencil to class each day.
- Listening to English songs at the end of class.
- 3. Halloween video.
- 4. Pumpkin show speech by our American exchange student.
- 5. Worksheet about the pumpkin show speech.
- 6. Halloween stickers and candy treats for those who listened attentively to the speech.
- 7. Memorial video.
- 8. Pronunciation pairs practice.
- 9. Individual pronunciation test.
- 10. Final listening test

Table 2: Term 2 Activities

Although some of the things on the list may not be conventionally defined as an 'activity', for the purposes of this paper, activities will be defined as measures taken to meet the prescribed curriculum and promote motivation in my students.

The first activity undertaken during term two was intended to address the term one problem of increasing numbers of students coming to class without their textbooks and pencils. I decided to implement a reward system in which each student would receive one participation point per day for bringing the textbook and one participation point for bringing a pen or pencil. 'There can be no doubt that in some circumstances, for some individuals, external rewards do work, at least in the short term and with regard to the specific situation in which they are applied (Williams and Burden 1997:134)'. In my situation, things couldn't get much worse than trying to have class with a limited number of textbooks being shared between the students.

I tried to throw a little peer pressure into the mix by putting my students into groups of four and telling them that each member was responsible for encouraging the other members to bring their books and pencils. Williams and Burden (1997: 131) underscore the importance of peer pressure when they write, 'learners' interpretations of how their parents, peers and teachers perceive them exerts a critical influence on their motivational style and thus their motivation to learn a language'. Each group was given an animal or flower name (i.e. fox, bear, daisy, rose) and when I called their group name at the beginning of the period, the group had to hold up their textbooks and pencils and tell me the names of any members absent that day. If all members present had pencils and books, I would award two points to the group. However, all members present must have their book and pencil. If one person forgot their book, the group got one point. If a pencil and a book were forgotten, zero points. Crookes and Schmidt (1991:448) point out that in some cultural areas 'individuals may feel a great sense of unease if forced to stand out from the group, with associated demotivating effects if classroom SL practices call for this'. Littlejohn (cited in Crookes and Schmidt 1991) found that group work allowed students to influence each other and it was my hope that my students would influence each other in a positive way.

I had an excellent response from the implementation of the participation points system and ended up with nearly all of my students bringing their books and pencils on a regular basis. There were, however, the odd few who consistently forgot their books, which led me to modify my system in order to reward all members of the group who brought books and pencils and not penalize members for the forgetfulness of others. The animal and flower names remained as an efficient way to take attendance and also proved useful to get group answers to questions (especially helpful in the largest class).

Since students had enjoyed listening to English songs during the first term, I decided to use songs as a reward for attentive behavior. I told my students that if they could pay attention to the day's lessons and I felt they deserved it, they would be rewarded with the chance to listen to English songs of their choice at the end of class. I told my students that they could bring in any songs they liked, as long as they were English songs. On good days, I would ask for a song (sometimes they didn't bring any, so then it became 'teacher's choice') and then I would write the title and the artist on the board and we would listen to the song. Sometimes I would write certain repeated lines on the board and ask them if they understood, and other times we just listened until the bell rang for class to end. There were times when we were doing other activities and the time flew by so that we didn't have time to listen to a song even though they had been attentive, but I never got any complaints. On those days, I always told them we could listen to one next time. Caffyn (1984, cited in Williams and Burden 1997: 135) found that most students she investigated rejected punishment as a motivating force, but 'it was felt that formalized reward systems could be successful in the eyes of both learners and teachers if well-organized and operated consistently'.

In October, I showed my students an animated Halloween video called 'Franklin's Halloween'. We had just completed a section in our textbook discussing the custom of celebrating Halloween. To avoid the 'naptime' problem that had occurred when showing videos during the first term, I required the students to complete a worksheet answering questions about the story. The use of the worksheet didn't lower the students' responses to the video, with the majority of students in all three classes returning a 'very interesting' response.

Another activity undertaken in October around the time of Halloween was a speech given to my students by the American exchange student who is attending our school. It happened that our exchange student came from a small town in Ohio State where they have a yearly festival called 'The Pumpkin Show'. I got permission for

her to come to each of my classes and give a speech about 'The Pumpkin Show', and show pictures of the event. I got together with her beforehand and discussed questions I could include on a worksheet for the students to do after hearing her speech.

I told my students that if they didn't get the answers to all of the worksheet questions just from listening to the speech, they could ask our speaker questions when she finished. I told them that there was no reason for anyone to get less than a perfect score on the paper since they could ask questions. This proved to be a very communicative activity with students scrambling to get all of the answers right by asking many questions.

After this activity, I rewarded good listeners with Halloween stickers and candy. I had told them before the speech that if they listened well and weren't rude to our speaker, they would get a reward. Out of all three classes only two boys didn't receive the reward. In that class (L3-A), the same two boys were the only ones who responded negatively to the stickers and candy reward. Morgan (cited in Pintrich and Schunk 1996:340) states, 'when teachers reward students for time spent working regardless of how well they perform, rewards may convey negative efficacy information and be detrimental to motivation'. Unfortunately, research has also shown that 'the introduction of extrinsic rewards into what was initially a challenging task actually serves to decrease intrinsic motivation' (Deci cited in Brown 1990: 386, see also Lepper, Greene and Nisbett, cited in Raffini 1993)'. Things would be so simple if all we had to do is give out candies to motivate our students. However, in this case, I happened to have some American Halloween candies and stickers and felt it was good timing for passing them out to my students. Perhaps the more effective motivator in this activity was the fact that the students were well informed of what was expected of them (listening attentively to the speaker, completing the worksheet questions in front of them). Pintrich and Schunk (1996: 358-9) point to clear expectations as necessary for good classroom management as well as being a motivating factor for students:

Rules, procedures, and expectations are proactive techniques designed to prevent problems. Teachers who use them wisely and devote adequate time at the start of the year to instill them in students will not regret the time spent, but rather will find that they benefit student motivation.

The memorial video was an activity that was ongoing through the whole second term. I told my students that I was making a memorial video of all of my seniors and that I wanted them to prepare something in English to say. I visited their classrooms at lunchtime to take some footage and filmed other parts during our class periods. At the end of the term, we viewed the edited version with input from myself and their other teachers. Though some of the students loved being filmed, others were shy and disliked the activity. The final viewing was well received by the majority of students in all three classes.

Pronunciation pairs activities were done throughout the second term for about ten minutes or so each week. Students would practice pronunciation pairs like 'ban, van'; 'fly, fry'; 'light, right'; and then quiz each other. We worked on pronunciations that they had found especially difficult up until that point. I told them to have their partner say one of the two words and then they were to guess which one their partner was saying. But I also said that if they make a mistake at guessing, it might be their partner's pronunciation that is at fault and not their ears. From my point of view, the students were very engaged in the activity and seemed to enjoy this practice and this was reflected in the students' activity interest responses. Another benefit of this activity was that it allowed even the lowest level students to be successful. Brophy (cited in Raffini 1993: 99) states that in order to enhance student motivation to learn it is essential to provide tasks for students that permit students 'to achieve high levels of success when they apply reasonable effort'. Previous class performance had little to do with who did well at this activity. The students could also have fun with exaggerated attempts at clear pronunciation and enjoyed watching me make 'funny faces' as I tried to show where the tongue, teeth, and lips are placed for different pronunciations.

The last two activities were the two required final tests. For some students, tests can be very motivating. The external reward of a high score alone may be motivating for some students. However, the desire for praise from parents, teachers or friends for doing well on a test may motivate other students.

Below are the results of the term one and term two activities interest evaluations from each class. The number of students responding does not always equal the total number in the class due to absences. Term two results show a clear rise in the number of positive responses for each class. (It should be remembered that activities 1 to 10

for Term 1 (see Table 1 above) were different from those for Term 2 (see Table 2 above).

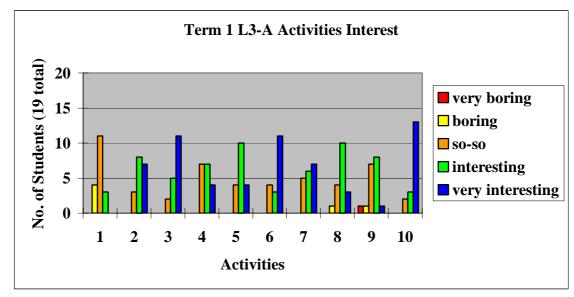


Figure 3

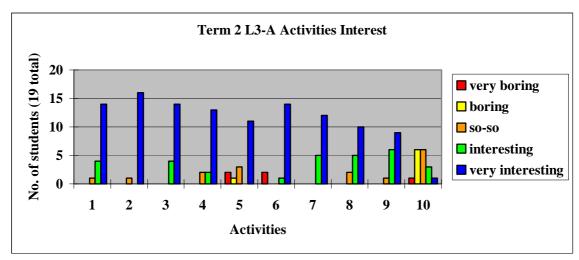


Figure 4

Figures 3 and 4 above show a rise in interest in most of the activities undertaken during term 2 in the L3-A class. In fact, eight out of the ten activities were rated 'very interesting' by more than half of the 19 class members. The two end of term tests were the only activities that did not receive a 'very interesting' rating by more than half of the class members. However, activity nine (the individual pronunciation test)

received six 'interesting' and nine 'very interesting' ratings still showing an above average reaction by more than two thirds of the 19 class members. The final listening test (no. 10) received the lowest rating which may be attributed to the students' dislike of this type of test, or to the fact that the test was more difficult than the listening test used during the first term.

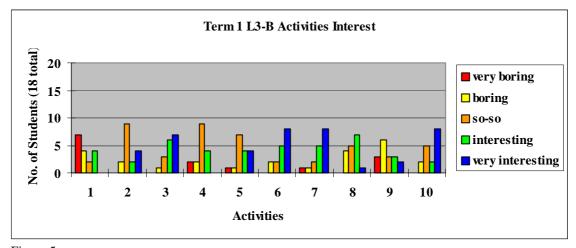


Figure 5

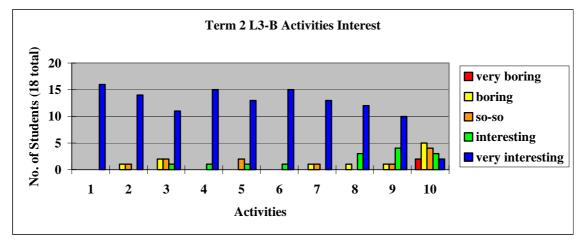


Figure 6

Again in the L3-B class there was significant improvement seen in the term 2 interest ratings over those of the first term. In figures 5 and 6 above a distinct difference can be seen in the numbers of 'very interesting' ratings given by the students on the second term activities. For the first nine activities more than fifty percent of the class gave ratings of 'very interesting', with the participation points for texts and pencils (No. 1) receiving a unanimous 'very interesting' rating. This was especially satisfying since this class had become very forgetful about bringing their books and pencils to

class and the participation point system solved the problem. Again the final listening test (No. 10) received the lowest rating with more than fifty percent of this class finding the test to be 'so-so', 'boring', or 'very boring.'

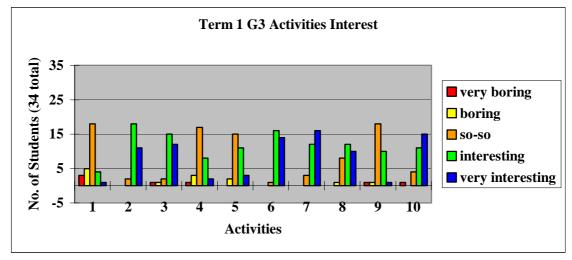


Figure 7

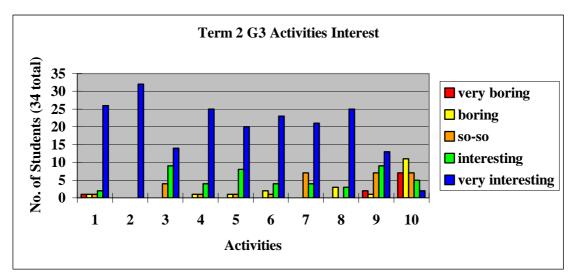


Figure 8

Finally, my largest and most challenging group, G3, also saw improvements in most of their activities' ratings as shown in figures 7 and 8 above. There was even a unanimous 'very interesting' rating on listening to English songs at the end of class (No. 2). More than fifty percent of this group gave all of the activities except 3, 9, and 10 a 'very interesting' rating. Activity three (the Halloween video) still received a high interest rating with more than fifty percent rating it as 'interesting' or 'very interesting'. This class rated the two final tests (No. 9 and 10) lower than the other

activities. Like the L3-A and L3-B classes, they rated the individual pronunciation test (No. 9) higher than the final listening test (No.10). This may be attributable to better performance by most students on the pronunciation test than on the listening test.

All three classes showed much higher interest ratings in the second term activities. With this shift in interest ratings, I began to expect that the students would also have higher motivation ratings at the end of the term.

Results of the Questionnaire

The results of the questionnaires administered before and after the new activities were introduced are in Appendices 6, 7 and 8. These results were separated into three categories: attitude (Appendix 5), extrinsic motivation (Appendix 6), and intrinsic motivation (Appendix 7). The L3-A class showed only slight shifts in all three categories. However the L3-B class showed a large shift toward the positive in all of the categories. Finally, the G3 class showed only slight changes in the three categories, the greatest being in the area of intrinsic motivation with a larger group showing very high intrinsic motivation than before.

Summary

The main aim of this action research project was to try to promote motivation in my three third year high school classes. At the outset of this paper two questions were asked, 'Can student motivation be increased in my classroom?' and 'If so, what is it that increases my students' motivation?' The answers were that student motivation did increase in my classroom, although what it is that improves motivation may differ from class to class and student to student. The improvement in attitudes, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation of the L3-B class was the most noteworthy of the three classes. Improvements shown in the L3-A and G3 classes were not substantial. The most notable change in all three classes was the increase in interest in the activities that were undertaken. This suggests that increasing student interest in individual classroom activities cannot guarantee a general improvement in attitude towards learning English, or that for some students, it may take longer than the duration of the project reported here for any such change to occur.

The answer to the question of what increases my students' motivation is not so simple. Above, many activities that were presented to my students are discussed. The activities used were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. I found that it was impossible to 'please all of the people all of the time'. However, I also found that it was possible to interest most of my students some of the time – a definite improvement over the state of affairs during the first term before the project took place.

Even the slightest increase in motivation that took place in the three classes included in this study was a move in a positive direction. The changes that took place in these classes due to this project can only really be considered significant if they improved upon what had been taking place before. I can say with confidence that this study did improve upon the previous situation.

Suggestions for promoting motivation

I found that action research like this is an excellent way to become more aware of what is really taking place in my classroom. Although my own observations and intuition were often confirmed by the results of the action research, there were times when the results showed me things that I wouldn't have recognized before. For example, I expected that my students would be most motivated by the extrinsic rewards like candy and stickers, but I found that was not necessarily the case. I also found that all three classes were more intrinsically motivated than I had assumed they would be.

All of the activities tried during the second term, or variations of these activities, and the rating system are recommended for promoting motivation in EFL classrooms. Time constraints and everyday mishaps are routine for teachers, so I suggest that a willingness to be flexible is essential when undertaking a project like this. I had my plan laid out quite clearly, but found that taking time out for discipline problems and broken down copy machines often meant I had to revise my plan.

Any effort to promote motivation in students and to listen to the students' reactions to these efforts will be a step in the direction to finding the most motivating activities for any particular class. The AMTB questionnaire is also recommended as a practical and enlightening tool to measure student motivation. As in this study, the AMTB should be revised to suit the group being measured.

In retrospect, I can see that combining the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation categories would eliminate the problem of trying to gauge the intrinsic motivation on only two questions. Perhaps in this particular study it was not specifically necessary to differentiate between the two kinds of motivation since the original goals were to promote motivation of any kind in students who were reluctant to put any effort into learning English and to find out what activities would motivate those students. That said, I still think that with an improved instrument, an effort to aim at increasing intrinsic motivation in the long term is an important goal for my future research.

A continuation of this study that allows the students more than just one school term to overcome attitudes that have been formed over many years should be considered. Because some improvement was seen in this short term study, it is likely that a longer study would produce even more improvement. I am currently teaching first year students who are younger and with whom I have more time to work on improving attitudes and motivation toward learning English. I am anxious to see what improvements can be made with these students over the next few years.

Interestingly, as the project unfolded, I observed an unexpected benefit for myself. After setting out with the goal of motivating my unmotivated students, I found *myself* becoming more and more motivated. The increased interest in class activities shown by my students made teaching more enjoyable and encouraged me to continue trying new ideas. This brought to mind the idea that student motivation and teacher motivation are entwined. This too would be a fruitful area of investigation for future research.

This project did not set out to inform the world of *the* way to motivate EFL students around the globe or even in Japan. This project was principally for myself and the 71 students of my Oral Communication II classes who took part in the study. The study has been invaluable for me and my future students by giving me a glimpse of the power of action research to improve any given classroom situation and providing me with the experience to make those improvements in my continuing career as a teacher of EFL. In addition, I hope it has provided a source of encouragement and ideas for other would-be action researchers.

On the last day of class I received letters from two of my female students thanking me for teaching them. Though the English wasn't perfect, the message was clear:

I though[t] you always watched all students do everytime. I respect you.

English is very difficult and I didn't like English. But I studied with you, and so I like English now.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

If I knew just a little about American culture, I would mark an 'O' in the space I felt showed how much I knew about American culture.
SAMPLE: I know (a lot Overy little) about American culture.
1) I think learning English is (easy very difficult).
2) I think learning English is (boring fun)
3) I (really like don`t like) the sound of English.
4) I (don`t wantwant) to study abroad someday.
5) I will (often never) need to use English in my daily life.
6) I will (never often) need to use English for my future job.
7) If I had a choice I (wouldwould not) study English.
8) My parents (wantdon`t want) me to study English.
9) Most of my friends (enjoydislike) learning English.
10) Speaking English is (not important very important).

Appendix 2

First Term Activities Interest Evaluation

Nar	meClass
On	a scale of 1 to 5 please rank each of these activities that we did first term
1 = very boring 2 = boring 3 = so-so, neither boring nor interesting 4 = interesting 5 = very interesting	
1.	Studying from the textbook
2.	Taking digital pictures and providing information for a computer log
3.	Listening to English songs
4.	Trying to fill in the missing song lyrics. (cloze listening activities)
5.	Looking at an old yearbook to learn the names of clubs and teams
6.	Playing games (English ping pong, bingo)
7.	Getting stickers for winning games
8.	Doing the final interview test
9.	Taking the final listening test
10.	Watching English videos
11.	Which activities would you definitely like to do again? (List as many as you want).
12.	Which activities would you definitely not want to do again? (List as many as you want).
13.	Are there any activities we did not do in class, but which you would like us to try?



(list as many as you want).

Appendix 3

Second Term Activities Evaluation

Put a circle around the number of an activity you would definitely want to do again. Put an X through the number of an activity you would definitely not want to do again. You may circle and X as many activities as you like.

- 1. Participation points for bringing your textbook and pencil to class each day.
- 2. Listening to English songs at the end of class.
- 3. Halloween video.
- 4. Pumpkin show speech by our American exchange student.
- 5. The pumpkin show speech worksheet.
- 6. Halloween stickers and candy treats for those who listened attentively to the speech.
- 7. Memorial video.
- 8. Pronunciation pairs practice.
- 9. Individual pronunciation test.
- 10. Final listening test.

<u>Appendix 4</u> <u>Example of Student Computer Log</u>



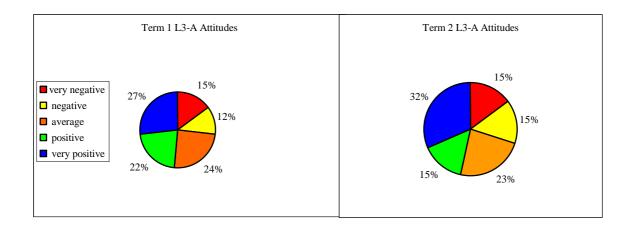
Masashi, Seigo, Kazuto

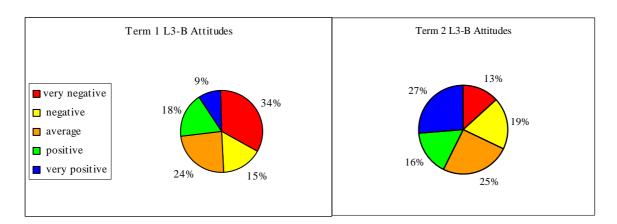
Masashi likes the music group "X JAPAN," baseball, and computer games. He can drink 200cc's of milk in 3 seconds!

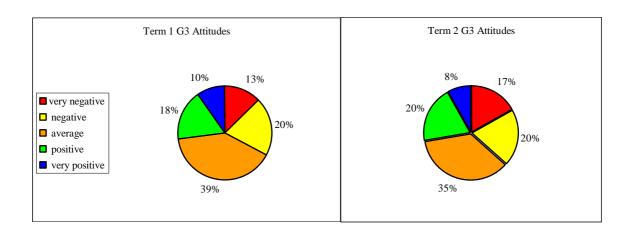
Seigo likes baseball, the music of Amy Suzuki, and board games. He has been to Tokyo.

Kazuto likes the music of Michael Jackson, wrestling, and karaoke. He thinks he is the fastest and the tallest.

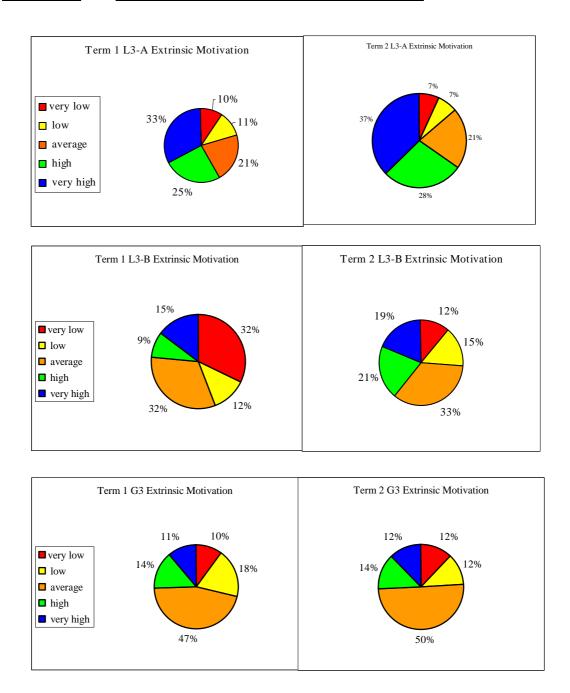
Appendix 5 Questionnaire results (Attitudes)







<u>Appendix 6</u> <u>Questionnaire Results (Extrinsic Motivation)</u>



-3%

-0%

13%



