



Student Views on Leadership within Small Groups in the Task-Based Language Classroom

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Abstract Research in general psychology has shown that when students work together in small groups, one student will often emerge as leader. This phenomenon, known as emergent leadership, has also been observed in the second language classroom. This paper reports on research that sought to determine students' views on the importance of leadership in the task-based language classroom. Students were randomly assigned to small groups that were fixed for an entire 14-week semester, and then in the following semester were allowed to self-select into groups. A task-based approach to language teaching was adopted, with students completing tasks in small groups. Following each semester, students were interviewed and asked about their experiences in their group. They were also asked for their views on the importance of group leaders within the foreign language classroom. Results show that students view leadership as important, and believe that leaders contribute strongly to the success of the group. The pedagogical implications of emergent leadership in small groups are considered.

Key words leadership, small-groups, task-based language teaching
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1. Introduction

Group work has become a mainstay of most language classrooms around the world, irrespective of the pedagogy employed (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2010), allowing students to interact with peers using the target language, and fostering communicative skills that are deemed to be of increasing importance in the global business market (Long & Porter, 1985). Although group work is central to language teaching and learning, there is still relatively limited research considering how aspects of group dynamics may impact on group processes, and this paper aims to address this by investigating emergent leadership in small groups. Based on data collected during a longitudinal mixed-methods study conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation (Leeming, 2014), students in a university context in Japan were randomly assigned to groups of three to four people and worked together for a 14-week semester. In the next semester students were allowed to self-select group members, and again worked together with their group for the duration of the semester. Classes focused on oral communication, and adopted a task-based language teaching (TBLT) framework (Willis & Willis, 2007; Willis, 1996), with a strong emphasis on group work. At the end of each semester students were interviewed regarding their experiences, and this paper focusses on their views on the importance of leadership within small groups in the language classroom.

2. Leadership in Small Groups

2.1 Leadership and group dynamics

Leadership is one of the cornerstones of groups dynamics research in general psychology (Forsyth, 2000; Forsyth, 2010), with a long history. Generally leadership can be considered as *official or emergent*. In the first instance, a leader is chosen by a group or non-group member, and is given power over the group, including the ability to reward or punish group members who are not considered to be conforming to the established norms of the group. Emergent leaders are not officially recognized

or appointed, but emerge as the unofficial leader of the group, exerting power and influence over group members, despite not having any formal recognition of their position (Northouse, 2009). It is this kind of leadership that is the focus of the current study.

Research investigating emergent leadership has focused on the traits that predict who will emerge as the leader in a given group (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986), and leadership styles and the success of groups (Kickul & Neuman, 2000). Personality has been investigated in some depth with a focus on the Big Five Model of personality. Although all five dimensions of personality have been shown to correlate with leadership, extraversion in particular has proven to be the clearest predictor of who will emerge as the leader of a group. The success of a given group has been shown to be dependent on a number of factors, including the personalities of group members, the nature of the task assigned, and the style of leadership adopted by the leader. Leaders are generally assumed to focus on maintaining healthy and positive relationships within the group, or successfully completing the task. Leeming (2013) found that in a Japanese context where students were studying English together in compulsory university oral English classes, students generally preferred to focus on the social harmony of the group. Indeed, only a very small number of participants focused on the task. This may in part be due to the relatively low-stakes for most of the group tasks, and the emphasis on process, not product by the teacher, as described in the study.

Research has also shown that there are groups where no leader emerges (Forsyth, 2010), and this can be due a number of variables, including highly motivated group members, or a shared goal. In this case the absence of a leader is not considered to be detrimental to the group performance, as all group members work consistently towards achieving the shared goal. Leeming (2014) investigated the emergence of leaders in the language classroom and showed that in an English language context most groups considered a single member to be the emergent leader, and that this leadership was generally stable as long as group membership did not change. Leeming (2014) attempted to determine the predictors of leadership in the language classroom, but found that personality was not significant in this context. The

only significant predictor of leadership was task-related proficiency, which in this case was English proficiency, although this only accounted for a small amount of the variance in leadership.

2.2 Leadership in language learning

Although leaders are considered to be central to the success or failure of groups both in business and education, there is limited discussion of leaders within small groups in the language classroom, and generally the literature has focused on teachers as leaders in classrooms or schools. Although group dynamics has been the focus of several books and papers in SLA (Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998), the discussion has been quite narrow. Researchers have focused on cohesion and group performance (Chang, 2010; Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994), or examining how the personality and proficiency of group members may influence the interaction (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Storch & Aldosari, 2013; Storch, 2002). These papers have helped increase our understanding of groups and context, but have not considered leadership in any detail.

Emergent leadership is briefly discussed by Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), and they claim that it is of great importance to the success of a group, although it can be fleeting, and is dependent on the task at hand. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) cite students who claim that the leaders of their group have enhanced their learning experience. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) view emergent leadership as being a positive aspect of groups, claiming that “although inexperienced or authoritative teachers may see them as challenges to their authority, the sharing of leadership functions between the official and unofficial leaders is both natural and necessary (p. 114).” They also consider leadership to be dependent on the task undertaken by the group, and claim that it can be fleeting.

Although these commentaries on leadership are welcomed, as mentioned there has been very little empirical research into leadership within SLA. A notable exception is the study by Leeming and Cunningham (2012), set in a university context in Japan. This study sought to determine factors that predicted who became leader in two comparatively large groups of students working together during an intensive summer

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English course. Students were placed into groups of 11 people, and worked together on a project as part of a one-week intensive English course. The study used both qualitative and quantitative data, and results showed that clear leaders emerged in both groups, but that predicting leadership was complex. Personality and language proficiency did not seem to have any bearing on emergent leadership, and two very different leaders emerged in the two groups studied. The authors discussed the potential importance of emergent leadership, as the leader takes on the teacher's role and effectively removes any autonomy given to the group. As mentioned previously, Leeming (2014) also considered emergent leadership in small groups, and found that proficiency was the only reliable predictor of who would adopt the leader's role within each group.

Despite the interest in leadership from researchers and teachers, with the exception of Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), there has been little consideration of the views of students involved directly in group learning in the language classroom. This study sought to establish the views of students on the importance of leadership in language learning. Although the value of a strong leader may be clear in business settings, it is unknown if students view leadership to be necessary when engaging in tasks in the classroom. It is possible that, with the brevity of tasks, and the relatively low stakes involved, emergent leadership is not considered to be of importance in a language-learning situation. The interviews conducted attempted to shed light on this.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

As mentioned previously, this study was part of a mixed-methods study conducted as part of a doctoral research project (Leeming, 2014). In total, 81 students participated in the study (58 male and 23 female students), which was conducted during compulsory oral English classes for freshman students. Classes were 90 minutes in duration, and occurred once a week during the 14-week semester. The students were enrolled in a science department at a private university in western Japan,

and were in three intact classes, assigned based on the students' major within the department, rather than their English proficiency. The age ranges of students was from 18 to 22, although the majority were in the 18–19 age range, with 77 first year students and 4 students who were repeating the course and were in the third or fourth year. All of the participants shared Japanese as their first language. English language study is compulsory at junior and senior high school, and therefore all students had a minimum of six years language study. Due to the heavy focus on grammar-translation during junior and senior high school, and the focus on passing university entrance exams, many students had limited experience speaking English and were nervous at the prospect of an oral English class. Students were given an explanation of the research project, and assured that any participation was entirely voluntary and would have no bearing on subsequent grades attained in the class.

3.2 Procedures

In the first semester students were randomly assigned to groups of 3–4 people using Google Random Group Generator, and these groups were fixed for the duration of the 14-week semester. For the second semester the students were allowed to self-select into small groups that were again fixed for the semester. Classes followed a TBLT framework (Willis & Willis, 2007; Willis, 1996), with students working together in their groups to complete simple tasks. There was a heavy emphasis on group work, and most tasks required the group to work together. At the mid-point and end of each semester students were required to take part in a 10-minute group conversation test entirely in English. The topics for this conversation were simple (see Appendix A for topics), and much of the time in class was spent practicing basic conversational techniques such as turn-taking and follow-up questions, in order to help students with the conversation tests, which accounted for 40% of the overall grade for the class. As mentioned previously, the classes were of mixed proficiency, most students were of relatively limited ability and could best be described as pre-intermediate, with average TOEIC scores of 390. This meant that the conversation-tests were considered to be quite a challenge, and students expressed reservations

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before the first test. The motivation of students was generally low, but students did want to pass the course and so attendance was good, and students did participate in activities. During the first semester students had to make short presentations to the class as a group on several occasions, and in the second semester they were required to complete two poster-presentations. All of the tasks were designed to foster a sense of collaboration within the group, although the syllabus was designated by the university. A representative lesson plan can be seen in Appendix B. There is lots of interaction, and the topic is relatively simple and engaging for students (past narrative).

3.3 Interviews

A large amount of both quantitative and qualitative data was collected for the main study (Leeming, 2014), but this paper will focus on the interview data. Hatch (2002, p. 91) stated that interviews, when used in conjunction with other data, allow researchers to “explore more deeply participants’ perspectives on actions observed by researchers.” In the current study, interviews were conducted each semester after all the data had been gathered in an attempt to minimize interference with the processes occurring in groups, and reduce the threat of social desirability bias. The interviews were formal (Spradley, 1979), and semi-structured to ensure consistency but also to allow the chance to follow up on important issues that could arise during the discussion (McDonough & McDonough, 1997).

Eight students from two complete groups were selected in each semester, making a total of 16 students. These students were selected based on the leadership displayed in each group, as this was the main focus of the doctoral research. Interviews lasted between 25 and 30 minutes, and were conducted by the researcher entirely in the students’ first language, Japanese. All interviews were recorded using an IC recorder to allow for subsequent transcription. In the second semester the interviews were also video recorded in order to give more detail and enable a deeper understanding of the interaction. Appendix C shows the structure of the interviews that was followed as closely as possible in both semesters.

Although my position as the teacher provided easy access to the students,

McDonough and McDonough (1997, p. 185) discuss how this kind of relationship between interviewer and interviewees can influence the results. Miller and Glassner (2004, p. 132) discuss the potential advantages that can arise, stating that: “The interviewee can recognize himself or herself as an expert on a topic of interest to someone typically in a more powerful position vis-à-vis the social structure.” I attempted to assure students that their responses would have no bearing on my assessment of them, and generally the students seemed comfortable and were willing to express opinions that did not always reflect positively on the classes.

The interviews were transcribed by the author, and the subsequent data were subjected to interpretive analysis (Hatch, 2002, p. 181). This approach aims for a holistic overview of the data in order to understand the data in all of its complexity. The steps for interpretive analysis are shown in Figure 1, which is taken from Hatch (2002, p. 181). Although I attempted to keep as close to the proposed approach as possible, due to limited time available I was unable to go back to the participants and confirm my interpretation of their views. As shown in step 8 of Figure 1, excerpts that supported interpretations were selected, and these were translated into English for use in this paper. All names used in the results section are pseudonyms.

1. Read the data for a sense of whole.
2. Review impressions previously recorded in research journals and/or bracketed in protocols, and record these in memos.
3. Read the data, identify impressions, and record impressions in memos.
4. Study memos for salient interpretations.
5. Reread the data, coding places where interpretations are supported or challenged.
6. Write a draft summary.
7. Review interpretations with participants.
8. Write a revised summary and identify excerpts that support interpretations.

Figure 1. Steps in Interpretive Analysis (Hatch, 2002)

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Importance of leadership

The interview data was examined in order to ascertain students' views on the importance of leadership in small groups in the English language classroom. Of the 16 students interviewed in total, 11 students claimed that leadership was important in small groups in the English language classroom.

Excerpt 1. Yuki, Semester 2.

“A group in the English classroom is just like everything else. If there is no leader the group will fall apart. You need someone to start and lead the conversation . . . you need someone in the center to control things.”

This was a common response from the interviewees. Students felt that the job of a leader in an English conversation class was to lead and drive the other students to ensure that conversation flowed smoothly. Observation of groups suggested that strong leaders did perform this role, and that groups without a leader did struggle. The importance of leadership is supported by Takayuki, who claimed that he had heard from a friend in another group that their group was leaderless. Takayuki's friend had claimed that this led to problems with the group, and made conversation very difficult. Observation data gathered during the main study (Leeming, 2014) supported the fact that groups without a clear leader struggled to make conversation. Of the twenty groups in the study, only one group were clearly without a leader, and they performed at a low level in the conversation tests, struggling to make conversation, with long pauses, and two members of the group not participating. As there was no leader, there was no-one to drive conversation or encourage the quieter members of the group to contribute, and this led to visible problems with maintaining simple conversation.

For students who are relatively inexperienced with conversational English, as was the case in this study, the challenge of a 10-minute conversation conducted

solely in English is considerable, and often students struggle, particularly with asking follow-up questions and extending the conversation beyond minimal responses. This is where the role of leader seems to be valued by most students. Many students talked about the leader making it easy to conduct conversation, and it is the leader who often directs questions and elicits responses from all members of the group.

Although by far the most common response supported the idea that students think that leadership is important, two of the students interviewed questioned this and claimed that leadership was not important. One student, Koki, claimed that his group had not really been a group, and therefore there had been no leader, and he had received no influence from any of the other group members. He did not seem to think that this was particularly important in the context of language learning, although his negative attitude to the group was discernable through the interview. The other student, who claimed leaders were not important in small groups, qualified his response by stating that it was the size of the group that dictated the importance of having a leader, as shown in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 2. Hiroki, Semester 2.

“Four people don’t need a leader. They can talk together as a single group and don’t break up into smaller groups. . . . if you have a group of eight people they will split, and that is when you need a leader in the middle of things to bring things together.”

Levine and Moreland (2006) state that small groups should consist of between three to five people working together face to face, and therefore Hiroki is no longer referring to small groups when he talks about a group of eight people. The groups chosen for this research project were between three and four people, as this is typical of the standard group size in this context, and in many language learning classrooms. Larger groups will have a very different group dynamic, and the issues surrounding emergent leadership are likely to change.

Three of the students interviewed claimed that the importance of leader was dependent on several factors. One student claimed that the cohesion of the group, and whether students knew each other was important. If students were friends

then a leader may not be necessary, but if it was the first time for the students to interact, and the atmosphere made it hard to talk, then a leader is needed to drive conversation. Kotaro expressed a similar view, claiming that it was dependent on the personality of group members.

Excerpt 3. Kotaro, Semester 2.

“If each person in the group chats then you don’t need a leader, but if you have a couple of people in the group who don’t like talking or don’t talk, then the leader can ask them questions and get them to talk . . . somebody has to do this or people who don’t talk won’t change and will never talk.”

Kotaro feels that the role of a leader is to drive the conversation and ensure that all of the members of the group are actively involved in the conversation. The need for a leader depends on the personalities of the members of the group, supporting the idea that when group members are highly motivated, there is little need for a leader (Forsyth, 2010). As mentioned previously, the students in this context were relatively low in speaking proficiency, and if one or two members of the group did not actively participate, this meant that a 10-minute conversation was extremely difficult for the group. In the case that group members were non-participative, a leader was needed to ensure that all members of the group were encouraged to take part. Interestingly, Kotaro seemed to think that if the students are given the chance to sit back and not participate, this will become a fixed behavior, implying that the leader has a lasting influence on individual members of the group.

Generally it seems that most students in this context were in agreement that leadership was important in small groups. This is an important finding, suggesting that students value the role of leadership, and that depending on the leader, the performance of the group may be very different. Forsyth (2010) produced a list of features negating the need for leadership in groups, and this is somewhat supported by the findings of this study. It seems that when the group are working well together and are all motivated to speak, there is less need for a leader, although generally a leader is considered to be important and to enhance the performance of the group.

4.2 Influence of the leader

Interviews also asked students their views regarding the influence of the leader in their group, and in group work in general. Again the majority of the students claimed that they had been influenced by the leader in their group and that the influence of a leader was very important. Yukie claimed that the leader in her group was very strong and had influenced her and the whole group, encouraging them to speak English and to ask follow-up questions in conversation. Ryotaro supported this as shown in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 4. Ryotaro, Semester 2.

“I was influenced. The leader spoke a lot and this made me feel that I had to try and do the same.”

Generally students seemed to consider the influence of the leader to be in the way that they modeled behavior that had been encouraged by the teacher, such as speaking in English and asking follow-up questions. This had led students to feel some kind of pressure to copy this behavior, which had in turn had a positive impact on their own performance, and that of the group.

Interestingly, when asked if negative leadership behavior would influence them, three of the participants said that an emergent leader who went against the desire of the group to speak English would not be allowed to be leader of the group, and would therefore be replaced. Yukie explained:

Excerpt 5. Yukie, Semester 1.

“If someone who does not like English came to be the leader of the group, they would be replaced.”

Takayuki, from the same group, also stated that although he was not the leader, if someone with negative attitudes became the leader he would replace them and take on the leadership role. These students support the idea that the leader is selected as a reflection of the attitudes of the individual members of the group (Nye,

Student Views on Leadership within Small Groups in the Task-Based Language Classroom (Leeming 2002), and as such is a representative of the group.

It should be noted that although many students talked about the importance of leaders, and the influence that they have on the group, when questioned directly as to whether they were influenced by the leader in their group, a number of students seemed reluctant to admit this and used the term *sukoshi*, meaning a little. As the groups were comprised of peers, the leaders were emergent and had no official power or influence over the other members of the group. As such, it may be that students were reluctant to admit influence, feeling that this may have made them look weak. It is also possible that due to the relatively low stakes in this context that influence was limited. Unfortunately this was not followed up on in the interviews, but it would be of interest to discover in future research possible reasons why students may be reluctant to admit influence from members of their own peer group.

Overall it was clear that students consider the leader to have a large influence over the other members of this group. This influence seems to stem from modeled behavior which members feel pressured to copy. Generally the influence of leaders was considered to be positive, although some students tried to limit the extent of the influence.

5. Conclusion

Groups are an integral part of most classroom-based language learning, and particularly in a TBLT framework, where students are often required to work together to complete tasks. Leadership is considered central to group dynamics research, and yet is still relatively unexplored within the field of SLA. This paper set out to establish students' views on the importance of leadership within small groups in the language classroom. Results clearly showed that students considered leaders to play an important role in the success of a group, by modeling the desired behaviors of the teacher, and by adopting a central role in driving the conversation. A small number of students believed that leadership may not be important if a group is motivated and cohesive, conditions which have been shown to lessen the likelihood

that a leader will emerge (Forsyth, 2010). Students also thought that the leader has a strong influence on the other members of the group, but some of the responses suggested that the leader is representative of the attitudes of the group, and students were somewhat reluctant to admit to being influenced directly by the leader in their group.

There were a number of limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, the results are highly dependent on context. Task-based learning has a heavy focus on group work, and many of the assessments in the current study were based on group performance, potentially enhancing the importance of the group and the leader. The students in the current study were generally of low motivation, and also low proficiency. This means that conversation was difficult, and this was more likely to increase the need for a strong leader to help drive the others. It is possible that in contexts where students are highly proficient and motivated, the importance of a leader is greatly reduced. Although the strong influence of context is a limitation, it is inherent in any study set in a real world context, and simply means that more research is needed to determine the importance of leaders in other contexts. A further limitation in the current study was the small number of students that were interviewed. Although more than 80 students were involved in the group work, only 16 were interviewed, and these were from four intact groups. This means that there is a possibility that these four groups may not have been representative of the general population. Perhaps a more serious concern is that the researcher was also the teacher, introducing the possibility of students attempting to provide answers that they thought would have a positive bearing on their course grades. The fact that students completed questionnaires about leadership during the course may mean that their awareness of leadership was raised, and also implies that the teacher has an interest in leadership in the language classroom, making it difficult for students to dismiss leadership as inconsequential.

Despite the limitations listed above, I believe that this research is an important step in understanding the processes that occur when students work together in groups in the language classroom. Despite the prevalence of group work, research

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investigating the influence of group dynamics is still limited, and this paper provides a small window into the beliefs of students regarding leadership in small groups. Further research should attempt to show empirically the impact that leaders have on individual members in groups. It would be of particular interest to investigate how different levels of leadership (weak / strong), and different types of leader (social / task-oriented) influence the performance of the group.

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APPENDIX A
TOPICS FOR THE CONVERSATION TESTS

Duration: 10 minutes.

1. Semester 1 Mid-term test.

What do you want to do after you graduate from University ?

2. Semester 1 Final test.

What is the best age to get married and why ?

3. Semester 2 Mid-term test.

If you could meet any famous person, alive or dead, who would you most like to meet and why ?

4. Semester 2 Final test.

If you could live in any foreign country for one year, which country would you like to live in and why ?

APPENDIX B
EXAMPLE LESSON MATERIAL

TOGETHERNESS

Goals

Students will be able to:

- a) Rank qualities in a future spouse.
- b) Practice giving and justifying opinions.

1. Elicit qualities in a life-long partner. Write them up on the board.
2. Write up the following list

Consideration Faithfulness Hardworking Intelligence Loving nature
Reliability Strong Will Tenderness
Sense of humor Physical Attractiveness).

Students match Japanese and English.

3. Students listen to Paul and Andrea talking about their perfect partner. Answer questions on the sheet.
4. Students work alone then in pairs and then 4 and decide as a group the top ten. Practice giving and justifying opinions.
5. Students must decide on a top ten and write it on a sheet of A3. They will have to explain top two and bottom two. Think about reasons.

Each group comes to the front to present their group results. One person each explains why for top/bottom 2. 1 person explains one quality.

6. Present official rankings (from survey)
7. Students study transcript of Paul and Andrea's conversation. Answer the questions. Find phrases used to give opinions. How did Paul fill silences and give himself more time to talk. Listen one more time to the tape.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. Introduce purpose-consent form. Confidential. No right or wrong answer.
2. Background information-self-introduction. English study to date. Group work to date. Do you like groups? Positive/negative experiences? Describe a typical leader.
3. Describe the other members of group. Relationship outside of class/prior relationship.
4. Why did you choose X as leader? How did they become leader? Were they

a good/bad leader? Did they influence you? How important is leadership in groups in the language classroom?

5. How was it to work with the same group for a term? Do you want to choose members or random assignment?