

EFL Students' Retrospective Motivational Narratives: Does the Instructor's Online Feedback Style Matter?

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, while educators worldwide have been struggling to enhance student motivation in a virtual environment, quite a few students have been disinclined to turn their video cameras on during class. This is a critical problem for instructors who want to monitor students' cognitive and affective states during class. One possible way instructors can help improve students' cognitive skills while promoting their positive affective states or motivation might be to provide effective online feedback customized for individual students. The present study examines the effects of an instructor's online feedback style on promoting students' motivation. First, I present and discuss the current problem and present the literature review. Second, I explain the study comparing group-based feedback and privacy-oriented feedback styles. Participants were 48 EFL university students who enrolled in the required first-year ($n=25$) and second-year ($n=23$) courses. Participants submitted pre- and post-semester motivational narratives at the end of the semester as well as their final reflections on what they learned in the course during the semester. The material was adopted from part of a retrospective motivational narrative questionnaire (Boku, 2005; 2008; see Appendix A). The statistical results indicated that only the group-based feedback group had a significant within-group difference in the pre- and post-semester motivational scores. However, there was no significant motivational mean difference in the post-motivational score between the group-based and privacy-oriented feedback groups. Regarding the qualitative analysis, participants in both groups did not use the word "feedback" as a high-frequency keyword in their post-semester motivational narratives, which was not the case for their final reflections.

Keywords: EFL, retrospective, motivation, narratives, online, feedback

Introduction

One of the most critical issues during the COVID-19 pandemic is how instructors can make online classes more communicative and motivating for students while securing their right to privacy. However, instructors are having a hard time keeping their classes communicative and motivating because increasing numbers of students prefer more privacy with their video off during online classes, which might lead to reduced student motivation. This is a critical problem for instructors who seek to keep classes at the same communicative level as pre-pandemic classes. Researchers, therefore, are wondering if instructors' online feedback styles affect student motivation, and if so, in what ways? To date, little is known about the relationship between EFL instructors' online feedback styles in online classes and students' motivation in them.

Therefore, the purposes of the present study are (1) to explore whether online

instructor feedback during classes affects EFL student motivation and (2) to compare the effects, if any, of group-based (GB) feedback and privacy-oriented (PO) feedback during online classes. GB feedback refers to a teaching style in which an instructor gives feedback to an individual student in the presence of other group members during a group breakout session. PO feedback refers to a teaching style in which an instructor gives feedback to an individual student privately in an individual breakout session. First, I summarize the literature review. Second, I demonstrate the method of comparing the effects of the two feedback styles by using a retrospective motivational narrative questionnaire (Boku, 2005; 2008). The questionnaire is based on the Naikan approach (Yoshimoto, 1965), a traditional Japanese introspective therapeutic approach. Third, I show the results of statistical and narrative analyses. Fourth, I discuss the results of this study. Finally, I conclude by giving implications for future research and discussing limitations of the study.

Literature Review

Commonly used self-reporting questionnaires such as the Attitude Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985) and Language Learning Orientation Scales (Noels et al., 2000) have been adopted in motivation studies. These scales explore student orientations from a cross-cultural communication perspective. Starting from a psychological standpoint, Deci and Ryan (2000) proposed self-determination theory (SDT), categorizing motivation as amotivation, extrinsic motivation, or intrinsic motivation. Researchers in various fields, including psychology, education, sports, and nursing, widely acknowledge SDT.

However, some researchers have pointed out the difficulty of adopting self-reporting questionnaires in EFL education because motivation is variable over time. Dornyei (2001), among others, raised a few problems regarding the self-reporting questionnaire:

1. Constructing a scale can be difficult because of the unstable nature of learners' motivations over time (Dornyei, 2001, p.16);
2. Simple questions can be interpreted by different learners in very different ways (Dornyei, 2001, pp. 201-202).

From a statistical analysis perspective, Macintyre et al. (2009) noted the variable aspects of the self as, "...a highly variable concept, not only cross-culturally but also intra-individually, as research with bicultural individuals shows" (p. 55). Dornyei (2005), Macintyre et al. (2009), and Ushioda (2009) stressed the variable nature of the students' concept of self (e.g., ideal L2 self, out-to-L2 self). Thus, the quantitative research paradigm has an inherent limitation in studying individual students' diachronic changes because it aims either to test validity of a universal theory by a cross-sectional survey or to apply a universal theory to explain a phenomenon.

Riley (2009) examined the change in Japanese EFL students' beliefs over time using a questionnaire based on quantitative research. The study demonstrated learners' motivational change depending on the time and circumstances by showing the results of "the shifts in student belief about language learning during the nine-month period of English study" (p. 102). Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2012) examined whether the ideal L2 self was correlated with a student's behavior and found it did not necessarily have such a relationship. They argued that factors affecting learning outcomes were not limited to internal factors, such as motivation or the concept of self.

More recently, Cao (2014), Vongsila and Reinders (2016), and Joe et al. (2017) addressed motivation from the perspective of willingness to communicate, and Walker

and Papi (2017) examined the relationship between participants' writing motivation and feedback-seeking orientation. Even more recently, Fong et al. (2021) examined participants from different backgrounds (i.e., European American, Asian American, African American, and others) in an ESL context in terms of their perceptions of instructor feedback. The study showed that feedback high in specificity was perceived as constructive, but that friendliness did not have an effect. Thus, Japanese EFL instructors might ask whether the findings of Fong et al. (2021) apply to an online Japanese EFL context.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, motivation issues have been discussed in online class contexts. Mahadin and Hallak (2021) examined situations in which students' cameras were turned on or off during virtual live lessons. They suggested that students not be required to turn their cameras on during the transitional period because they are not ready or are reluctant to do so. Kim (2021) suggested that students' security and privacy concerns during online classes reduced their motivation in a Korean EFL educational context. The question is whether class would be successful if conducted in secure and private circumstances without students' cameras turned on.

Thus far, extensive research on motivation has grown in cross-cultural communication, intra-individual change, and the online classroom context. However, to my knowledge, the relationship between EFL students' intra-individual motivational change and the instructor's online feedback styles has received little attention. Therefore, the present study will examine how EFL instructors' online feedback styles affect local students' motivational change over time.

Method

Participants

Participants included university EFL students in the Kansai area enrolled in the required first-year and second-year English classes. Those participants who did not submit retrospective motivational questionnaires with official approval due to sickness were excluded from this study prior to the analysis, which did not cause any threat that less motivated students might not have participated, or make the participants not reflective of the actual population. Questionnaire non-submission did not affect students' course grade. As a result, participants included 48 students; the GB feedback group included 25 (12 male and 13 female) students while the PO feedback group included 23 (10 male and 13 female) students. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 20 years. Their English level ranged between low- and high-intermediate.

Materials

Retrospective motivational narratives sheet (Boku, 2005; see Appendix A)

Ishin Yoshimoto's (1965) Naikan approach, which focuses on self-reflection to achieve self-awareness or self-cultivation, is called Naikan therapy in psychiatric treatment. The original Naikan therapy focuses on three thematic categories: (1) what others did to help the individual in the past, (2) what the individual did to express gratitude to those who helped them, and (3) how the individual might have caused troubles or difficulties for others. In the Naikan interaction, an interviewer listens to an interviewee talk about what the latter has learned by reflecting on the past. The interview is usually conducted over a week in a private space contained within a large public space. During this time, the interviewee should concentrate on a focused analysis of a particular time in the past. For

example, the individual might reflect on what they were like from age eight to the present. After the interviewee has finished this basic reflection, the interviewer listens to that reflection in terms of the three Naikan thematic categories. By reflecting on what they were like in the past, interviewees recall their fathers, mothers, teachers, and friends. By describing what they recall, they not only remember what they were like in the past, but also gain insights into what they are like in the present. Inspired by the Naikan approach (Yoshimoto, 1965), a traditional Japanese self-introspective therapy, Boku (2005) created the retrospective motivational scale in which participants described what they recalled for a particular period. It uses not only narratives from each period of the respondents' schooling, from the first year of junior high school to the current year of university education, but also a five-point Likert scoring system from 0 through 5 based on their motivational strength (see Appendix A).

Final reflection on course learning

The participants reflected and wrote narratives on what they learned during the semester. All participants had to submit the narratives to the instructor at the end of the semester via a learning management system (LMS).

Software

SPSS Base system Version 27 was used to compute the statistical analysis, and NVivo version 1.5.2 was used for the narrative analysis.

Procedure

Overall: GB and PO feedback groups

The relationship between the instructor's online feedback styles and students' motivation was compared with the GB and PO feedback groups. The researcher controlled the total time of online feedback given to each participant. During the semester, participants in the GB and PO feedback groups received 14 minutes of individual online feedback regarding their presentation outlines and drafts, including revisions. The feedback was consistently based on a "learning goal" (Elliot and Dweck, 1988), in which the instructor pointed out problems to be resolved on a participant's submitted outline or draft. The researcher gave positive feedback to participants on their hard work and then gave them goal-oriented suggestions for possible use in their future presentations.

At the end of the semester (Week 15), all participants were to submit (1) the final reflection on the course and (2) a retrospective motivational questionnaire (see Appendix A) via a learning management system as part of the course requirement. Because the motivational questionnaire includes private narratives, the researcher explained to students that the questionnaire submission was based on their free choice. As a result, those who submitted the questionnaire got one extra point, which was not part of the course grade. Therefore, the submission or non-submission of the questionnaire did not affect their course grade. Those who did not submit the questionnaire due to absence resulting from sickness were excluded from this study prior to analysis. Non-submission of the questionnaire had no negative influence on their course grade because an extra point given to those who submitted the questionnaire was not included as a course grade anyway. The detailed procedure for each feedback group is explained below.

GB feedback group

Participants in the GB feedback group learned about differences in basic rhetorical structures between Japanese and English (e.g., thesis statements, paragraph structures, topic sentences, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences) and grammar (e.g., conjunctions, punctuation marks) from a textbook. Participants received the GB feedback in class for their skill development. The GB feedback was aimed at facilitating reciprocal learning through within-group scaffolding based on the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD refers to “the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The individual participant in the group received the researcher’s feedback. Feedback for an individual student was open to other members in the same breakout session in Zoom, so the entire GB feedback group did not necessarily receive more individual feedback than the PO feedback group. The final class goal was to give a presentation at the end of the course based on a theme provided by the researcher around the midterm of the semester.

1. Pre-task phase

Before each lesson from Weeks 9 through 12, participants had to submit an outline, revised outline, draft, and revised draft based on the given presentation theme. Submission of these assignments was conducted via a learning management system.

2. During-task phase

During Weeks 9 through 12, four participants were assigned to work together in a breakout session on Zoom. The researcher visited each breakout session to give the GB feedback on each participant’s outline, revised outline, draft, and revised draft. The researcher gave each participant online feedback for a total of 12 minutes (i.e., 3 minutes x 4 times).

At the end of the semester (Week 15), the researcher gave each participant feedback in a 2-minute online evaluation in the group breakout session. Thus, each participant received 14 minutes of feedback in total during the semester. Members in the same group had a chance to ask the researcher any questions.

3. Post-task phase

After receiving the researcher’s feedback on participants’ assignments in the lessons (Weeks 9 through 12), participants submitted (1) a summary of the researcher’s feedback and (2) a reflection on what and how they learned from the researcher’s online feedback. The participants focused on their own learning goals and cognitively reflected on what they could or could not achieve in class.

PO feedback group

The participants in the PO feedback group were assigned to give 3-minute presentations three times on Zoom (one group presentation and two individual presentations) during the first semester. The learning goals of this course were to achieve the successful expression of each participant’s logical thoughts in spoken English. The PO feedback was aimed at creating a secure and self-regulative environment for the participants (1) to pursue their own goals from a cognitive perspective and (2) to incorporate or integrate their acquired knowledge with the researcher’s private assistance.

1. Pre-task phase

Before each class, participants were to submit an outline, first draft, and final draft (revised draft) via a learning management system.

2. During-task phase

During each lesson, participants used a textbook with instructions on writing an outline and a draft and on revising a draft to prepare for a presentation on themes assigned by the researcher. The participants also reviewed what they had learned in the previous year, such as grammatical and rhetorical differences between writing in English and Japanese. Each participant was assigned to an individual breakout session, and the researcher gave each one private online feedback on their outline (2 minutes x 2 times), first draft (2 minutes x 2 times), and final draft (2 minutes x 2 times) submitted before the lesson. After presentations, the researcher gave private online evaluations of each presentation (1 minute x 2 times), and participants could ask any questions they had. Thus, each participant received a total of 14 minutes online feedback during the semester.

3. Post-task phase

After receiving feedback on the assignment (e.g., outline, first draft, and final draft) in the lessons, all participants submitted (1) a summary of the researcher's online private feedback and (2) a reflection on what and how they learned from the feedback. The participants focused on their own learning goals and cognitively reflected on what they could or could not achieve in class.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. Are there any within-group motivational mean differences in the GB and the PO feedback groups?
2. Are there any within-group motivational relationships in the GB and the PO feedback groups?
3. Is there any post-semester motivational mean difference between the GB and the PO feedback groups?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses tested in this study are:

1. There are within-group motivational mean differences in the GB and the PO feedback groups.
2. There are within-group motivational relationships in the GB and the PO feedback group.
3. There is a post-semester motivational mean difference between the GB and the PO feedback groups.

Results

Quantitative analysis

Research question 1—*Are there any within-group motivational mean differences in the GB and the PO feedback groups?*

Participants' pre- and post-semester motivational mean scores and standard deviations are shown in the descriptive statistics (see Table 1).

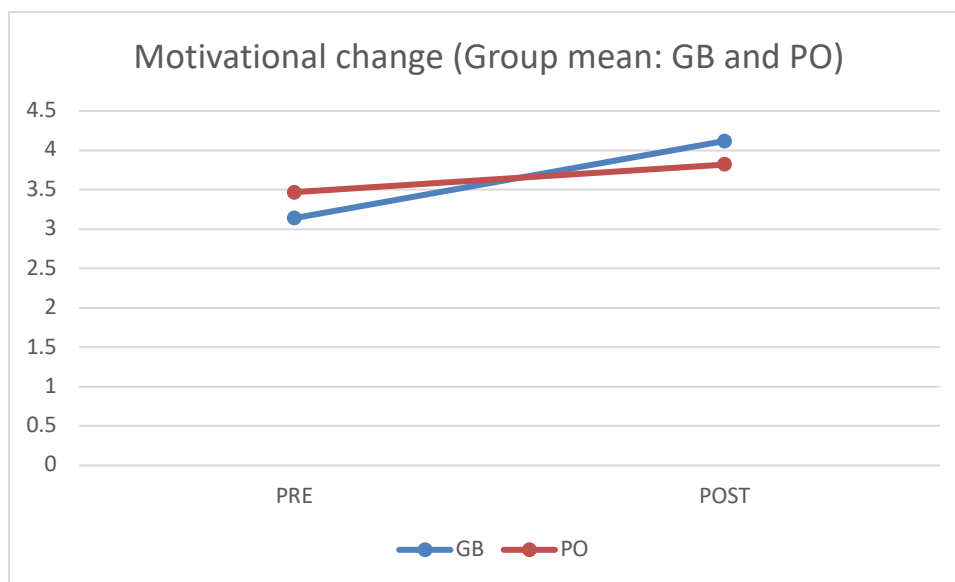
Table 1
Descriptive statistics: GB and PO feedback groups

	GB (n=25)				PO (n=23)			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Pre	3.24	1.36	1	5	3.47	1.03	1	5
Post	4.12	0.72	3	5	3.82	0.65	2	5

As for the GB feedback group, the motivational scale showed a reliability of (α) .696. As a result of the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the null hypothesis was retained. Therefore, to examine the difference in the pre- and post-semester motivational mean score of the GB feedback group, the paired sample t-test was administered. The result indicated a significant difference between the scores ($t = 4.176, df = 24, p < .001$).

Regarding the PO feedback group, the motivational scale showed a reliability of (α).701. The one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the null hypothesis was rejected ($p < .01$). Therefore, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was administered to examine the differences between pre- and post-semester motivational mean scores of the PO feedback group. Pre- and post-semester motivational scores showed no significant difference in the PO feedback group ($Z = 1.930, p = .054$). Graph 1 shows the pre- and post-semester motivational mean scores for both groups.

Graph 1
Pre- and post-semester motivational mean comparison: GB and PO feedback groups



Research question 2—*Are there any within-group motivational relationships in the GB and the PO feedback groups?*

The Pearson correlation of the GB feedback group was .644 ($p < .001$) and that of PO feedback group was .600 ($p < .001$). These results showed within-group motivational relationships in both the GB and PO feedback groups, possibly indicating that both feedback styles have positive relationships with motivation; however, considering that only the GB and not the PO feedback group showed a significant difference between pre-

and post-semester motivational scores, it might be possible that only the GB feedback group received a positive motivation effect.

Research question 3—*Is there any post-semester motivational mean difference between the GB and the PO feedback groups?*

The t-test result showed that the null hypothesis for normal distribution was retained. No significant differences were shown when comparing the post-semester motivational mean scores between the GB and the PO feedback groups. Although the GB feedback group showed a gain in pre- and post-semester motivational score with correlation, it is not clearly determined that the GB feedback style is significantly better than the PO feedback style because the two groups showed no significant post-semester motivational mean difference. In sum, statistical results alone cannot conclusively determine whether the two feedback styles significantly differ. The following section discusses the qualitative analysis results.

Qualitative analysis

1. Pre- and the post-motivational narratives: GB and PO feedback groups

The researcher extracted students' motivational narratives of this academic year from pre- and post-semester motivational narratives in Japanese and translated them into English. See the students' original Japanese keywords in English for GB (Table 2) and PO (Table 3) feedback groups. The frequently used keywords in Tables 2 and 3 include only those that appeared more than five times in the pre- and post-semester motivational narratives. Word clouds represent the original Japanese words used in the pre- and post-semester motivational narratives. Frequently used keywords are shown in a larger font and the less frequently used in a smaller font. Word clouds 1 and 2 represent original Japanese words used in the GB feedback group's pre- and post-semester motivational keywords and Word clouds 3 and 4 represent those in the PO feedback group.

2. Pre- and the post-semester motivational narratives: GB feedback group

As shown in Table 2, frequently used words “university” and “entrance exams” in the pre-motivational narratives were substituted for the words “fun” and “class” in the post-motivational narratives, while “English” and “think” appear in both narratives.

Table 2

Keywords used most frequently in the pre- and post-semester motivational narratives: GB feedback group

Keywords used most frequently: The GB feedback group	PRE (number of times used)	POST (number of times used)
1	English (19)	English (10)
2	University (13)	class (9)
3	entrance exam (6)	fun (8)
4	think (6)	think (5)

Word cloud 1 includes words like “university,” “English,” “entrance exams,” “think,”

Word cloud 4

Words used in the post-semester motivational narratives: PO feedback group



2. Final reflection: GB and the PO feedback groups

Although the word “feedback” did not appear in either the GB or the PO post-semester motivational narratives, it did appear in the participants’ final reflections (see Table 4 in Appendix B). The final reflections are students’ reflections on what they learned during the semester, not the pre- and the post- semester motivational narratives. The keywords used most frequently in the final reflections (i.e., noun, verb, adjectives) were translated and categorized as (1) the keywords used most frequently in both the GB and PO feedback groups or (2) group-specific keywords used only in the GB or PO feedback group (see Table 4). Table 4 shows the 18 most frequently used keywords in the narratives in both groups, including the word “feedback.” The difference between the GB and PO feedback groups is that the former includes the word “teacher” whereas the latter does not in the top five frequently words. In addition, the word “feedback” was shown to occur slightly more frequently in the GB feedback group than the PO feedback group.

Word clouds 5 and 6 (see Appendix B) list the original Japanese words used in the final reflections in the GB and PO feedback groups, respectively. The frequently used group-specific keywords in the GB feedback group included “fun,” “nervous,” “senior high school,” “assignment,” “accustomed to,” “Japanese,” “positive attitude,” and “reason.” In contrast, the PO feedback group included four frequently used keywords: “method,” “expression,” “outline,” and “individual.” The GB and PO feedback groups differed in that the former showed emotion-oriented words while the latter did not in their final reflection.

Discussion

I hypothesized that both the GB and PO groups would have a within-group relationship and a motivational mean difference. Although both groups showed a significant within-group relationship, the GB feedback group alone had a significant within-group difference. Graph 1 indicates that the GB feedback group had a lower pre-semester motivational score than the PO feedback group, but that it had a higher post-semester motivational score than the PO feedback group. These results suggest that the GB feedback group enhanced participants’ motivation more effectively than the PO feedback group. However, the research results also indicated that there was no significant difference between the groups in the post-semester motivational mean score. In sum, statistical analysis alone cannot conclusively determine whether the GB feedback enhanced participants’ motivation better than the PO feedback.

On the other hand, the post-semester motivational analysis showed that the keyword “fun” was used frequently, but “feedback” was not shown in either group. For the

motivational narratives, students had to reflect on their past motivational state at a particular age between junior high and the present, overlooking past learning experiences. This helped them delve into their own cognitive and affective (motivational) states from a long-term (macro-level) perspective. As a result, students found that classes were “fun”.

In the final reflections, however, the keyword “feedback” occurred more than five times in both groups. Students were asked to observe their immediate (most recent) learning context in their final reflection. Therefore, they naturally paid attention to their cognitive and affective (motivational) states on specific experiences in class from a short-term (micro-level) perspective. As a result, they might have used the keyword “feedback” frequently in their reflections.

The fact that participants’ post-semester motivational narratives include “fun” but not “feedback” might indicate that instructor’s feedback (style) was not relevant from a long-term (macro-level) perspective. From a short-term (micro-level) perspective, however, an instructor’s feedback might have been somewhat relevant, along with other factors that might have influenced the students’ immediate learning.

The group-specific keywords used most frequently in the final reflection represent unique factors that might have affected participants’ short-term motivation in each group. The study found that participants in the GB feedback group tended to include emotion-oriented words, whereas those in the PO feedback group tended to use knowledge-oriented words. Thus, the disposition or nature of participant motivation in the GB and PO feedback groups differed from each other from a short-term perspective. To summarize, whether or not this difference is attributable to the feedback style remains unknown from the present quantitative and qualitative studies because of the possible intervening variables that might have affected the disposition of participant motivation.

Limitations of the study

One limitation in the study is that the motivational scale used showed middle-level reliability, which is not high enough with a small population. This might have caused a problem in generalizability. In addition, the study did not include a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester due to the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic schedule change, which caused a critical difficulty in the comparison of pre- and post-motivational scores/narratives. In light of the original retrospective motivational narrative analysis (Boku, 2005; 2008) designed to compare participants’ reflection on their motivational change from the beginning to the end of the semester, the pre- and post-semester motivational narrative analyses alone at the end of the semester were not enough to examine their long-term (macro-level) cognitive and affective (motivational) changes.

Conclusion

The present study investigated whether an instructor’s online feedback style influenced EFL students’ motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The quantitative analysis results showed that the GB feedback group had higher post-motivational scores than pre-motivational scores. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis results indicated that the instructor’s feedback style might enhance their short-term (micro-level) motivation in their immediate learning context, but not their long-term (macro-level) motivation. A qualitative study also indicated that the GB and PO feedback groups showed different types of keywords (i.e., emotion-oriented and knowledge-based) regarding short-term motivation, which might not be attributable to the instructor’s feedback style alone due

to other possible factors. Thus, from the present study results, it cannot be conclusively determined whether an instructor's online feedback style enhances students' motivation. Students' affective states, including motivation, are individually divergent and variable over time. Therefore, future studies should examine the relationship between an instructor's online feedback style and students' motivation, focusing on their motivational narratives from a long-term (macro-level) and a short-term (micro-level) perspective with a larger population based on a mixed-methods study.

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Appendix B

Table 4
Keywords used most frequently in the final reflection: GB and PO feedback groups

Keywords used most frequently: Final reflection	Order	GB group (number of times used)	PO group (number of times used)
Keywords used by both groups	1	class (79)	presentation (82)
	2	English (60)	English (71)
	3	presentation (55)	class (47)
	4	teacher (32)	learn/study (26)
	5	Thank you (25)	Thank you (24)
	6	learn/study (18)	think (16)
	7	improvement (16)	improvement (16)
	8	think (12)	consciousness/awareness (12)
	9	good (11)	not good at (11)
	10	content (8)	teacher (10)
	11	ability (8)	ability (10)
	12	speak (8)	speak (9)
	13	feedback (7)	understand (7)
	14	consciousness/awareness (7)	good (6)
	15	understand (7)	feedback (5)
	16	do my best (7)	content (5)
	17	not good at (6)	do my best (5)
	18	structure (6)	structure (5)
Group-specific keywords	1	fun (24)	method (13)
	2	nervous (11)	expression (8)
	3	senior high (8)	outline (7)
	4	assignment (7)	individual (5)
	5	accustomed to (6)	
	6	Japanese (6)	
	7	positive attitude (6)	
	8	reason (5)	

