

Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom

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Introduction

The topic of this book – *group dynamics* – may sound like one of those very scientific terms that are impressive but which no one understands. This is not surprising: before we came across the concept, almost by accident, we had had only a very vague idea about what it could mean. And although now both of us are convinced that group dynamics is probably one of the most – if not *the* most – useful subdisciplines in the social sciences for language teachers, it is still virtually unknown in second language (L2) research.

Therefore, we believe that before we embark on our exploration of the field, we owe you some initial explanation. In this introductory chapter we would like to address three questions that we would ask if we were readers of this book. These are:

- What is group dynamics and why is it important for language teachers?
- Why is ‘group dynamics’ such an unknown concept in L2 studies and where can we find more information?
- What will be learned in this book and how will it help our teaching?

Invitation to participate

Before we answer these questions, let us briefly talk about you, the ‘reader-thinker-reflective teacher’. We have written this book for a relatively wide audience that would include would-be and practising teachers, methodologists, teacher educators and applied linguists, but we would expect everybody who decides to spend some time with this book to share one thing in common: an interest in the language learning/teaching process within a classroom context. So we assume that whatever your current position, you consider yourself (at least partly) a language teacher at heart.

As we will argue, group dynamics is more than a domain of

knowledge (i.e. rules and principles); it also involves a general group-sensitive approach and attitude. So that you can share these more personal aspects, we invite you to join us, to reflect and to add your experiences to the discussions. You have certainly been involved with many groups, teams and classes, and will have noticed yourself some effective elements of group dynamics. Your own past experience, while perhaps seldom considered within the light of group dynamics, is a great source of information. We encourage you to draw on it and thereby enrich and expand on what we say.

Think about it first

Remember some groups that you really liked belonging to. What were their qualities? Then remember a few that were not so good, or were outright terrible. What were the differences? What do you think makes a good group and a not so good group?

Throughout this book we are going to tell many personal stories and allow many other people's voices to be heard, trying to create a kind of community within a book. We hope you will examine the ideas we present critically and compare them to your own life experiences. This is particularly important because the relevance of the principles and strategies that we will present greatly depends on the cultural and institutional context you work in. Therefore, we would like to invite you to continuously explore the applicability of the material with regard to your own school context. Given the diversity of language teaching situations worldwide, it is unlikely that everything we say will be directly relevant to your own teaching. What works in one location might be a recipe for failure in another. Although between the two of us we have had some teaching experience in a number of countries in Europe, the US and East Asia, we are not under the illusion that we have 'seen it all', and no matter how hard we have tried to avoid any cultural, social or gender bias, some might still be unintentionally here. Please bear this in mind when you come across something in this book which you think is culturally biased or which does not make any sense from your perspective.

Reflection

Ask the people around you casually, 'Are you currently a member of a "good" group? Or do you teach a "good" group?' And if the answer is positive, 'Is this a common thing in your life/teaching? What made this group good? How did it happen?'

What is group dynamics and why is it important for language teachers?

There are two simple but basic facts that have led to the formation of the subdiscipline of group dynamics within the social sciences which has the explicit objective of studying groups:

1. Groups have been found to have a ‘life of their own’ – that is, individuals in groups behave differently from the way they do outside the group (which is reflected, for example, when we say that someone has got into ‘bad company’).
2. Although groups vary in size, purpose, composition and character, even the most different kinds of groups appear to share some fundamental common features, making it possible to study ‘the group’ in general.

Inspired by these observations, the systematic study of groups was initiated in the United States by social psychologist Kurt Lewin and his associates in the 1940s, and literally thousands of research papers and monographs have been written on the topic ever since. Group dynamics is a vigorous and vibrant field, overlapping various branches of psychology and sociology, and, as you can imagine, there is also a lot of interest in its results within industry and business (e.g. the study of management teams), psychotherapy (e.g. group therapy) and even politics (e.g. the nature of political leadership and decision-making). Currently, the field is experiencing a renaissance: as Levine and Moreland (1998) conclude in the *Handbook of Social Psychology*, during the past 15 years interest in groups has increased markedly amongst scholars, as indicated by the number of pages devoted to research on groups in the major academic journals.

One of the reasons for the widespread interest in groups is the recognition that a group has greater resources than any single member alone – an observation that has also been expressed in proverbs in many cultures (e.g. the Kenyan proverb, ‘Sticks in a bundle are unbreakable’, or the English proverb, ‘Many hands make light work’). Indeed, the ‘TEAM’ acronym says it all: ‘Together Everyone Achieves More’. The basic assumption of this book is that group dynamics is also relevant to educational contexts because the class group can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of learning:

- In a ‘good’ group, the L2 classroom can turn out to be such a pleasant and inspiring environment that the time spent there is a constant source of success and satisfaction for teachers and learners alike. And even if someone’s commitment should flag, his or her peers are likely

to ‘pull the person along’ by providing the necessary motivation to persist.

- In contrast, when something ‘goes wrong’ with the class – for example conflicts or rebellious attitudes emerge, or there is sudden lethargy or complete unwillingness for cooperation on the students’ part – the L2 course can become a nightmare. Teaching is hard if not impossible and even the most motivated learners lose their commitment. Does the following extract ring a bell?

From an interview with a student

I: Do you remember something about the bad group?

A: Kids getting late to class and leaving early, people sleeping in the class, and talking about all kinds of crazy things, and girls brushing their hair, doing their nails . . . and not looking at the teacher at all, and I would feel really bad, and I would look at the teacher and the teacher wouldn’t see because he wouldn’t look at the students . . . (Adapted from Costa Guerra 2002)

What causes these differences? Why do some classes feel ‘good’ and some ‘bad’ at different times or all the time? What is it about certain learner groups which makes them appropriate or inappropriate learning environments? In *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom* we argue that it is largely the dynamics of the learner group – i.e. its internal characteristics and its evolution over time – that determine the climate of the classroom. This learner group, made up of the teacher as the central figure and the students as active members, is a powerful social unit, which is in many ways bigger than the sum of its parts. If group development goes astray, it can become a serious obstacle to learning and can ‘punish’ its members by making group life miserable. However, when positive group development processes are attended to, they can reward the group’s members and can provide the necessary driving force to pursue group learning goals beyond our expectations. Earl Stevick (1980) has summarised this point succinctly when he stated that in a language course ‘success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom’ (p. 4).

Why indeed . . . ?

‘But why should we pay attention to group processes? Isn’t our job simply to teach efficiently? Surely the group process can look after itself? The way the students relate to each other is not the teacher’s business; the teacher’s business is to transmit content, and whether

the class gets on with each other is irrelevant. However, that is not the message I got from the cries of misery from staffrooms all over Britain, and I am convinced that a successful group dynamic is a vital element in the teaching/learning process.’

(Jill Hadfield 1992:10)

Why is ‘group dynamics’ such an unknown concept in L2 studies and where can we find more information?

Having read the above section, you would be quite right to ask, ‘If this is all true, why is group dynamics so unknown in language education? How come few have thought about these things before?’ To add to your puzzlement, it is not only language education where group dynamics is virtually unknown but this is true of the whole domain of education. Why is this?

The honest answer is that we don’t know. Of course, we can think of several possible reasons:

- Group dynamics researchers do not like to talk about educational contexts because in most schools it is difficult to find proper ‘groups’. It’s not that there are no groups, but just the opposite: there are too many of them and they overlap considerably. In most schools in the world, class group membership fluctuates continuously: the group is regularly split up into smaller independent units based on gender (e.g. when boys and girls are taught physical education separately), competence (e.g. half of the class studies a language at a more advanced level), or interest (e.g. various specialisation tracks). It is also common that for certain classes some other students join the group; and even with fairly stable class groups, at least one key member – the teacher – may change regularly, according to the subject matter. Thus, in such an environment it is difficult to define what the ‘primary group’ is, which might be the reason why we are aware of only one single work that covers this subject – *Group Processes in the Classroom* by Richard and Patricia Schmuck (2001) – although this book is already on its 8th edition . . .
- For reasons unknown to us, university teacher education programmes all over the world tend to specialise on subject-matter training, and far less attention is paid to practical (educational), let alone psychological, issues. So, if you want to obtain, say, an English teaching degree, you are more likely to have to study Shakespeare or generative syntax than the psychological foundation of the classroom. And even in practical teacher training courses organised outside the university

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system, the useful insights and suggestions provided are only very rarely accompanied by a more theoretical justification of group dynamics.

- In language education and applied linguistics, the problem is further augmented by the fact that hardly any high-profile specialists and theoreticians have a background in psychology, and therefore a domain such as group dynamics is usually outside their scope or interest.

Christopher Brumfit on the need to understand groups – almost 20 years ago!

‘ . . . any use of language by small groups in the classroom requires learners to operate with a great deal more than language alone, for other semiotic systems will come into play, and personal and social needs will be expressed and responded to, simply as a result of the presence of several human beings together for a cooperative purpose. But the ways in which these systems interact have not been systematised by researchers . . . ’ (Brumfit 1984:74)

Luckily, modern language education has raised awareness about group issues: after all, communicative teaching activities often require *small group work* and active *interaction* among the students, which would be very difficult to achieve if, say, the class was split up into cliques who did not communicate with each other. Therefore, there has recently been an increasing amount of published material in the L2 field on groups and student relations that you can turn to for additional information. We have summarised the works we have found most useful in the Further reading box below.

Further reading

If you are interested in practical aspects of group dynamics in language education, we would recommend Jill Hadfield’s (1992) pioneering book, *Classroom Dynamics*. This is an excellent practical book, offering a collection of interactive group-building language activities that are accessible and easy to apply. A more theoretical overview can be found in Madeline Ehrman and Zoltán Dörnyei’s (1998) *Interpersonal Dynamics in Second Language Education: The Visible and Invisible Classroom*, which provides a comprehensive synthesis of research in this area.

Although the two works above are the only available books in

the L2 field specifically targeting group issues, we can find some shorter discussions in journal articles or book chapters, and a number of related issues have also received increased attention during the past decade. Articles addressing general group-related questions include Dörnyei and Malderez (1997, 1999) and Senior (1996, 1997, 2002). Cooperative language learning, which is a small-group-based instructional approach built on the principles of group dynamics, has also been analysed by a growing body of literature (for a review, see a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* edited by Nyikos and Oxford 1997). To learn more about the issue of the teacher as a facilitator, please refer to Underhill (1999) and Stevick (1990). Practical ‘warmer’ and ‘icebreaker’ activities have been offered by several teachers’ resource books, e.g. Frank and Rinvoluceri (1991), Malderez & Bodóczy (1999) and Maley and Duff (1982). Other L2-specific works that contain material relevant to group dynamics include Arnold (1999), Brumfit (1984), Legutke and Thomas (1994), Murphey (2001a), Murphey and Jacobs (2000) and Williams and Burden (1997).

Outside the L2 field, we find an abundance of group-related materials, particularly with a non-educational focus. As mentioned earlier, Schmuck and Schmuck (2001) is the only comprehensive overview of group dynamics in the classroom. However, several classroom management handbooks also cover group issues – Jones and Jones (2000) is a classic, already on its 6th edition. We would also recommend Tiberius’s (1999) very useful trouble-shooting guide to small group teaching.

Within the actual field of group dynamics, the most comprehensive summary is provided by Forsyth (1999) – which again is regularly updated (it is now on its 3rd edition) – and Brown (2000) is also on the way to becoming a classic (now on its 2nd edition). Johnson and Johnson’s (2000) seminal text on group theory and group skills (already on its 7th edition) also has a lot of relevant materials. Two recently published texts that we have found illuminating are Levi (2001) and Oyster (2000) – the latter is particularly refreshing with its good sense of humour. Finally, a sub-area of communication studies – *small group communication* – also displays significant overlaps with group dynamics; a classic text (already on its 6th edition) that we have used is Wilson (2002).

What will we learn in this book and how will it help our teaching?

The objective of this book is to promote a wider understanding of the principles of group dynamics in the language teaching profession. On the one hand, we have intended this to be a practical book that brings group dynamics to life by relating it to real classrooms, including frequent illustrative materials and quoting a range of different ‘voices’ talking about groups, such as teachers, students and researchers. On the other hand, we would also like to provide systematic discussion of the major issues and tenets of the field. There is a well-known (and perhaps too-often-quoted) saying, attributed to Kurt Lewin, which states that ‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory.’ Both of us have personally experienced the truth of this claim and believe that even when our aim is to achieve an understanding of the practical aspects of a certain topic, it is important to have an overview of it. Thus, in the following chapters we will invite you to consider and explore:

- the most important group characteristics;
- the main stages of group development;
- the various functions and features of different leadership styles (after all, every teacher is, by definition, a group leader).

We will also address very practical points such as:

- how to handle conflicts;
- how to increase friendship amongst the students;
- how to make the class more goal-oriented.

And we will elaborate on abstract but highly useful terms such as:

- group cohesiveness;
- group norms;
- group structure.

Will knowing about all this help actual teaching? We think so. In fact, we feel group dynamics is at the heart of teaching anything. Our suggestions come from our own experience of teaching with an increased awareness about group dynamics. This awareness has made us more confident and, we believe, more successful teachers. We have watched group after group through the lens of group dynamics and implemented the ideas we suggest in these pages. We have seen disparate students become cohesive supporting groups of individuals, daring to push the limits of their own development. Several ways of creating positive group dynamics are simple, effective and easy to

implement, provided we realise their potential. And while bigger group dynamics issues that help us to understand classroom events may need more attention, they certainly do not require scientists and researchers to ‘decode’ them. At the end of each chapter, we will summarise the most important aspects in accessible group-building strategies and suggestions, and we will list these all together in the concluding chapter.

Let us just say one more thing by way of recommendation: we have found that group dynamics is a genuinely *interesting* discipline. It is a bit like peeping behind the curtains and finding out a hidden dimension of a familiar thing, in our case the language classroom.

Will it work in your school?

One of the reviewers of the manuscript of this book has warned us that some readers might be inclined to dismiss the content of this book as a mere ‘luxury’ that teachers who do not work in privileged circumstances simply cannot afford to attend to. Yes, we can see that an overburdened practitioner whose main job is to get large classes through a number of language exams might find it more difficult to implement our ideas than others working in a more permissive environment. Yet this does not so much raise questions about the overall validity of group processes as about educational change and school reform in general. We truly sympathise with colleagues who work in school situations in which many group-building strategies seem unrealistic. But we hope that even they will find some manageable ideas and further inspiration in the following pages. We will return to this question in a section in the concluding chapter that highlights the need to consider the whole school environment.

The importance of spending time on group dynamics

The successful business management consultant and writer Steven Covey (1989:151) introduces a ‘Time Management Matrix’ as a useful tool to help to increase self-awareness and effectiveness. The matrix (see overleaf) uses four criteria to describe things we do: along the side, Covey puts ‘Important’ and ‘Not Important’, and on the top he puts ‘Urgent’ and ‘Not Urgent’. He then lists activities that are typically done in each of these spaces.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<i>(Space 1)</i> Crises Pressing problems Deadline-driven projects	<i>(Space 2)</i> Prevention, PC activities Relationship building Recognising new opportunities Planning, recreation
NOT IMPORTANT	<i>(Space 3)</i> Interruptions, some calls Some mail, some reports Some meetings Proximate, pressing matters Popular activities	<i>(Space 4)</i> Trivia Some mail Some phone calls Time wasters Pleasant activities

Covey argues that any one of the four quadrants can become bigger and bite into the time of the others. When the Important/Urgent quadrant (Space 1) is dominant, we seem to continually be putting out fires and can burn out. On the other hand, if we spend a great deal of time on Important/Not Urgent activities (Space 2), this tends to reduce the number and severity of the fires that occur in the first place. Those who concentrate on Not Important/Urgent activities (Space 3) are not understanding goals and plans and have a short-term focus. And finally those whose activities are mostly in the Not Important/Not Urgent quadrant (Space 4) are irresponsible, depend on others a lot, and may often get fired.

Most group building activities belong to the Important/Not Urgent quadrant of the matrix, in Space 2. Below we have created a simplified grid for teachers from the point of view of group dynamics; we only included the Important row, even though we are aware how much time and energy we tend to spend on not important activities nowadays, such as red tape. The results of concentrating on each of the two ‘spaces’ are:

- *Important/Urgent*: Stress and burnout; frequent crisis management/ putting out fires; being ‘on the run’; often feeling exhausted.
- *Important/Not Urgent*: Calmer state; fewer and less severe crises; balance; improved quality of life; time to just be there; often feeling energised; job satisfaction.

Thus, the point we would like to make is that we sincerely believe that the more time we invest in the Important/Not Urgent activities, the

less we need to worry about crisis management. It will give us more time to look more closely at the quality of teaching rather than continually putting out management fires. Learning about group dynamics and organising well-functioning groups will go a long way toward facilitating smooth classroom management and enhancing student performance. Looking at the teaching task matrix below, how much time would you estimate that you spend in each of these two spaces normally?

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<i>(Space 1)</i> Using discipline and control strategies (controlling distracting students and stopping arguments) Finding short-term solutions ‘Fast food’ class preparation Combating student apathy	<i>(Space 2)</i> Socialisation Community/group building Planning, seeing the big picture Engendering motivation Teacher development

Some people who live in Space 1 justify it by saying they have to stay there to keep the wheels turning and they accuse people in Space 2 of being egocentric for taking time to go and develop themselves. We feel that when you choose to spend time in Space 2, it is far from egocentric; the healthy construction of ourselves and of cohesive groups in our classes demand that we spend quality time in Space 2. Of course, none of us lives in any one space all the time. But we need to step back every once in a while and reconsider how we might improve the quality of our lives. This is a Space 2 book.

1 Becoming a group

This chapter will:

- *discuss what a ‘group’ is;*
- *describe how learners in a new class can become a ‘real’ group;*
- *present ways by which teachers can help the group formation process.*

In the Introduction we already mentioned that class groups are powerful social units and group characteristics considerably influence the rate of learning and the quality of time spent in class. In this chapter, we will first provide a more precise definition of what a ‘group’ is. Then, we start our exploration of the dynamics of class groups by going back to where everything starts: the first few lessons spent together. This is a highly important period in group life because much of what will happen later has its seeds in these first encounters. In describing how a group is formed, we will first examine the *initial emotions* characterising the first few classes, then go on to analyse a key component of the group’s emerging internal structure, the *intermember relationship patterns*, and finally discuss practical ways to promote the gelling process of the class.

1.1 What is a ‘group’?

What is a group? If we think about this question, it soon becomes clear that not every grouping of people is a ‘real’ group. For example, people sitting in an airport terminal waiting for their flight are not a group, and neither are the people in the reading room of the public library. So what makes a group a ‘group’?

Human beings are group beings . . .

‘People grow up in groups, sometimes called families; they work in groups, as engine crews, design teams or hunting parties; they learn in groups; they play in groups, in a multitude of team games; they

make decisions in groups, whether these be government committees, village councils or courtroom juries; and, of course, they also fight in groups, as street gangs, revolutionary cadres and national armies. In short, human beings are group beings.'

(Rupert Brown 2000:xv)

Rupert Brown (2000:3) has offered the following minimalist, common-sense definition of groups: 'A group exists when two or more people define themselves as members of it and when its existence is recognised by at least one another.' In other words, a group qualifies as a 'group' when it has become a psychological reality for insiders and outsiders alike. We can, of course, try and provide a more detailed and more descriptive definition. After reviewing the literature, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998:72) identified the following characteristic features of a 'group':

1. There is some interaction among group members.
2. Group members perceive themselves as a distinct unit and demonstrate a level of commitment to it.
3. Group members share some purpose or goal for being together.
4. The group endures for a reasonable period of time (i.e. not only for minutes).
5. The group has developed some sort of a salient 'internal structure', which includes:
 - the regulation of entry and departure into/from the group;
 - rules and standards of behaviour for members;
 - relatively stable interpersonal relationship patterns and an established status hierarchy;
 - some division of group roles.
6. Finally, as a direct consequence of the above points, the group is held accountable for its members' actions.

The question, then, is: Are language classes real 'groups' in the psychological sense? They certainly are as they display all the above features: class groups are characterised by considerable interaction amongst the students; they are distinctly recognisable units with which learners typically identify strongly; they have an official purpose; they usually operate for months if not years; they are highly structured and a student's good or bad achievement/behaviour usually reflects well/badly on the other class members.

1.2 Initial emotions in class

Think about it first

Imagine you are going to start learning a new language and the first class begins in just a few minutes at a new school. You don't know your classmates or your teacher. How do you feel and what are you thinking?

Let's start at the very beginning; the first lesson. Because we teachers have had so many 'first lessons', it is easy to forget how stressful this time might be for learners. It is comparable to walking into a party when you hardly know anyone there. This is how a Hungarian university student recalled in an interview how she first felt in a language course:

At the beginning, when I didn't know the group, I was always nervous – when nobody knows the others yet and doesn't even dare to approach and start getting to know them. Everybody is alone and so very shy; you don't know what you can joke about and what you can say to the others without offending them; you don't even know if they are good people or bad ones . . . It's all so uncertain. You don't know how other people's minds work.

(Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998:110–111)

This account is consistent with the research reports on how members of any newly formed group feel (McCollom 1990). Indeed, if we think about it, it is easy to understand why the process of group formation is so difficult for many learners. Students must deal with others whom they hardly know, and they are uncertain about whether they will like them or, more importantly, whether they will be liked by them. They observe each other suspiciously, sizing up one another and trying to find a place in an unestablished and unstable hierarchy. They are on guard, carefully monitoring their behaviour to avoid any embarrassing lapses of social poise. They try to present ideal images to one another, while hiding any signs of weakness. Those who lack sufficient social skills often find this process very demanding and frustrating. But even for socially adept people finding an identity in the group is no easy task. The 'fusion with the group' requires redefining themselves and constructing identities as group members rather than separate individuals – synchronising their behaviour with that of others by restricting it to some extent without relinquishing their uniqueness as autonomous human beings.

At the same time, learners also have doubts of a more academic nature. They are uncertain about how much they will benefit from the

classes and they do not know what working in the group will entail and whether they will be able to cope with the requirements. Learners keep comparing themselves to others, many of whom appear to be more competent and proficient. Joachim Appel, a language teacher turned language student, had such thoughts as he listed his fears (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001:110):

My fears: being called on to say something, mistakes, corrections, irony, ridicule. I keep comparing myself to the others. Even more important for my well-being than I thought: comprehension of what is said in class.

Students are also striving to get used to the teacher's personality and style, and working out which behaviours are acceptable or desirable to the teacher. And, of course, all these complex processes are happening simultaneously while learners are also expected to do certain language tasks using the target language with others. A very stressful situation indeed!

The most common unpleasant feelings that many learners experience the first time they are in a new group are:

- general anxiety;
- uncertainty about being accepted;
- uncertainty about their own competence;
- general lack of confidence;
- inferiority;
- restricted identity and freedom;
- awkwardness;
- anxiety about using the L2;
- anxiety about not knowing what to do (comprehending).

Although the list is long, indicating that there is usually considerable emotional loading 'in the air', this may not be obvious to the onlooker, as on the surface the first language classes tend to run smoothly and harmoniously. In their search for approval and acceptance, learners are usually on their best behaviour and the social interaction between them often resembles polite 'cocktail party talk' (Yalom 1995). This is, however, no idle period in the group's life: scholars are in a general agreement that underneath the surface much structuring and internal organisation occurs, and within a very short time the group establishes a social structure – peer relations, status hierarchy, role and norm systems – that will prevail for a long time (cf. Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998; Forsyth 1999; Shaw 1981). It is up to the teachers how well they can utilise this initial smooth period to lay down the foundation of healthy future group development.

Questionnaire 1

How students feel in the first few lessons of a new class group

Thank you for filling this form out. You will learn about the group results in a few days.

*Please put an 'X' in the slot on the continuum which best describes how you **typically** feel in the first few lessons spent in a **new** class group (**not** this class).*

relaxed ___:___:___:___:___:___ nervous

confident ___:___:___:___:___:___ shy

sociable ___:___:___:___:___:___ withdrawn

willing to use the L2 ___:___:___:___:___:___ reluctant to use the L2

Now try and think back: how much has this class helped you to feel more . . .

relaxed?.....

.....

confident?

.....

sociable?

.....

willing to use the L2?

.....

Is there anything you would suggest that we do to make the time spent in class more enjoyable and useful?

.....

Questionnaire 1 offers a quick way of taking the ‘emotional temperature’ of the students in the forming period. The initial items are formulated in a way that they refer to general feelings rather than feelings towards the particular situation the learners are in – this way it may be easier for them to produce honest responses – and relating the general to their current experiences is a good conversation starter.

What about you, the teacher?

So far we have only mentioned that the beginning period is stressful for the learners. However, teachers are also members of the group and very often they also have anxieties of their own. You may be new to the school or may never have taught the particular L2 level before. You may be unfamiliar with the textbook or the type of course to be taught. You may be inexperienced or simply nervous in the company of new people. Even seasoned teachers often have ‘stage fright’, particularly during the group formation stage.

Indeed, from the point of view of emotional orientation, many teachers are not unlike the other members in their class groups. A great deal of the psychological processes underlying group formation apply to teachers as well. For this reason, it may be particularly important for you at this stage to take part in the classroom events as an ‘ordinary’ group member by joining – as much as is feasible – some of the ice-breaking activities and, in a reciprocal fashion, sharing some personal information about yourself with the students. Naturally, in your position as group leader and knowledge source, you also have unique tasks and concerns; these are discussed in Chapter 6 in more detail.

Reflection

Ask other teachers how much and what kind of information about themselves they initially share with their students. How do you feel when you hear personal information from a teacher or speaker?

1.3 Intermember relationships

Clearly explained . . .

‘The initial event in group interaction, the establishment of a relationship between two or more persons, is often referred to as *group formation*. It is evident, however, that the formation of a group is a continuous process. That is, the formation of the initial

relationship is a necessary condition for group existence, but a group during its existence is in a never-ending process of change. The relationships among group members . . . are modified from day to day. The modifications are relatively large early in the life of the group; after the group has established quasi-stable relationships, the changes may be so slow and of such lesser magnitude as to be almost imperceptible.’
(Marvin Shaw 1981:81)

The first aspect of the group structure that emerges during the group formation period is the pattern of newly formed *relationships* between the learners. Already after the first few encounters there will be instinctive *attractions* between some class members, whereas others may have taken a dislike towards some of their peers. According to Shaw (1981) and Schmuck and Schmuck (2001), initial attractions are caused by factors such as physical attractiveness; perceived ability and competence; similarities in attitudes, personality, hobbies, living conditions, and economic and family status (see Table 1). These factors, however, are usually of little importance for the group in the long run. A key tenet in group dynamics is that group development can result in strong cohesiveness among members *regardless of*, or even *in spite of*, the initial intermember likes and dislikes (Dörnyei and Malderez 1999; Rogers 1970; Turner 1984). In a ‘healthy group’, initial attraction bonds are gradually replaced by a deeper and steadier type of interpersonal relationship: *acceptance*.

The concept of ‘acceptance’ was highlighted by humanistic psychology in the 1950s, referring to a feeling towards another individual which is non-evaluative in nature, has nothing to do with likes and dislikes, but is rather an ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers 1983) towards the individual, acknowledging that person as a complex human being with many (possibly conflicting) values and imperfections. As Rogers (1983) has put it, acceptance involves ‘prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities’ (p. 124); it could be compared to how we may feel toward a relative, for example an aunt or an uncle, who has his or her shortcomings but whom we know well and is one of us.

One of the most important characteristics of a good group is the emergence of a general level of acceptance between members, and this will override even negative feelings between some. That is, we can actually come to accept group members even if we would perhaps dislike them as individuals outside the group. This surprising and seemingly unrealistic claim has received consistent support in the research literature (see, for example, Turner 1984) and we have also

Table 1 *Factors enhancing intermember attractions and acceptance*

Initial attractions:

- physical attractiveness
- perceived ability and competence
- attitude and personality similarities
- shared hobbies
- living near to one another
- similar living conditions and family status
- comparable economic status

Acceptance (later):

- learning about each other
 - proximity (physical distance)
 - contact
 - interaction
 - cooperation
 - the rewarding nature of group experience and the successful completion of whole-group tasks
 - extracurricular activities
 - joint hardship
 - common threat
 - intergroup competition
 - the teacher's role modelling
-
-

observed the power of acceptance in our own teaching practice. When this acceptance is modelled by the teacher, it becomes easier for students to do themselves.

1.4 How to promote acceptance

It is our experience that the teacher can play an important role in helping the class to gel by creating appropriate conditions and selecting suitable activities for the first few lessons. We must realise that peer affiliation does *not* necessarily occur automatically, which is attested to by the numerous language courses we have seen where after months spent together, students do not even know each other's names. The following account about an unsuccessful group by a young adult learner of English is by no means unique:

Well, this was a group of a rather 'disintegrating' kind. That is, it was the typical case when you have two 45-minute lessons a week, and you don't know the others attending the course at the beginning of the semester, sometimes you can't even recognise them by face, and neither do you know at the end of term who the people

are with whom you have spent 14 times 90 minutes. And . . . the group did not really have any cohesiveness, didn't move into the same direction.

So how can we consciously promote acceptance among our students? Here are a number of factors that will help bring the students together (cf. Dörnyei and Malderez 1997, 1999; Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998; Hadfield 1992; Johnson and Johnson 1995; see Table 1).

Learning about each other

By far the most crucial and general factor fostering intermember relationships is *learning about each other* as much as possible, which involves sharing genuine personal information. Acceptance simply does not occur without knowing the other person well enough. Enemy images or a lack of tolerance very often stem from insufficient information about the other party which, when left as it is, can grow into escalating 'cold war' tendencies and bullying. A great deal of this necessary learning about each other can actually be done in the target language, as part of a learning activity, thus serving the parallel purposes of helping the group to form and to learn the target language. Therefore, we would recommend that you periodically include low-risk self-disclosure activities to help classmates become more familiar with each other. Remember, the most interesting thing to talk about is yourself – forget the cardboard characters of Suzi in New York and Billy in London from the coursebook.

Rose Senior (2002) on information-gathering tasks – we couldn't agree more!

'In order to encourage the students in their classes to interact freely with one another, language teachers often devise tasks that require students to gather information from their peers. This information commonly relates to personal likes and dislikes, preferences, habits, hobbies, skills, experiences, and so on. I have seen teachers handle information-gathering tasks in widely differing ways. Some teachers consider that the task is finished when students have filled out their individual grids. In such cases the information-gathering task has a pedagogic purpose (to practise a new language form, such as "Have you ever . . .?") but not a social one. Other teachers intuit the group-building potential of having plenary sessions in which the information gathered by individuals is tabulated and focused on by the class as a whole. This gives students the opportunity to learn