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 commit-
> tees, 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 demon-strate 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 estab-lished 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.

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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

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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.

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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? ....

....

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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

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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*

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> *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

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> more about their classmates . . . Focusing on the content of what
> people say about themselves, rather than on the form alone, enables
> classes of language learners to evolve into learning communities, in
> which students know and respect one another as people.'
>
> (pp. 401–402)

Proximity, contact and interaction

Proximity is the formal term used to indicate the physical distance
between us. This is a powerful factor that can create some solidarity
with the other party in itself – it explains, for example, the occasional
feeling of commonality with others in a lift. This is why the seating
pattern in the classroom is of special significance, and regularly moving
people around in the first few classes is an effective intervention
technique teachers can use to be in proximity with everybody else and
to keep the class 'flexible' (see section 1.7 for practical tips on how to
do this).

 Contact refers to situations where learners can meet and commu-
nicate spontaneously – an obvious factor to promote relationships.
Examples of high contact situations include the time spent in meeting
places such as cafeterias or the various outings and other extracurricular
activities the school organises. *Interaction* is more than contact; it refers
to special contact situations in which the behaviour of each person
influences the others. This interdependence is a powerful gelling agent.
In the language classroom a great deal of interaction occurs, for
example, when students have to do something together in small-group
activities or in project work.

From an interview with a student about a 'bad' group

A: *[In this group] students had few opportunities to get in close
    contact with each other.*
I: *So what should the teacher do?*
A: *For example, if the teacher could divide students into small
    groups to do some activities. They would get used to talking to
    each other. Without such activities students do not have the
    means to get to know each other. And then their relationship
    would naturally remain cold.* (Adapted from Lin, 2002)

Cooperation

Cooperation between members for common goals, for example to
accomplish small group tasks, helps them settle into cohesive groups.