Using group dynamics in the classroom

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This introduction to group dynamics in language classrooms aims to give hope, principles and activity ideas to teachers. Student anxiety, shyness and social relationships can limit students' ability to communicate in the classroom. Teachers can influence the group dynamics and lead students to accept one another as co-learners and cooperate on classroom goals. Forming a classroom group involves attainable goals, norms for behavior that uphold the goals, and activities that help students build accepting relationships. The reward of building good group dynamics is seeing students perform to their potential.

　本稿の目的は、語学の授業におけるグループ・ダイナミクスについて紹介し、語学教師に希望、基本原則、そしてアクティビティのアイディアを提示することである。　生徒の不安や引っ込み思案、また社会的諸関係は、教室でのコミュニケイションに際して能力の発揮を制限しうる。　しかし教師はグループ・ダイナミクスに影響を与え、生徒が互いを共同学習者として受け容れあい、授業の目標に向かって協力するよう導くことができる。　授業におけるグループの形成には、達成可能な目標、その目標を支持する行為規範、生徒が受容しあう関係を作ることを助けるアクティビティが必要である。　良好なグループ・ダイナミクスを形成することができれば、生徒がそのポテンシャルを充分に発揮することが可能となろう。

A high school boy named Sho taught me that learning to speak a foreign language is not only a cognitive challenge, but also a social one.

　　I planned a tell-and-retell storytelling task for my high school students, based on research that has shown that task repetition can increase students' fluency and accuracy (Bygate, 1996). The students had written a narrative for homework. I gave them time to quietly prepare how they would tell their story. Then I led the students to tell and retell their story to several people in the class. At the end of the class period, I asked Sho, a lower level student, "Did it get easier to tell your story?" I hoped it had been a successful experience for him. Instead he looked discouraged and replied, "it was easy to talk to some people and then hard to talk to others." I remembered that Sho had told his story to a couple of self-confident girls. Sho's experience demonstrated to me that the objectives of a lesson can be blocked by poor classroom dynamics.

Learning to speak a foreign language is a cognitive and a social challenge; it requires risk-taking and relationships. The students' relationships can cause any well-planned lesson to succeed or fail. Classroom dynamics significantly affect the learning environment and thus the effectiveness of our lessons. Is there anything we can do to shape the group dynamics of our classrooms to make them more effective learning environments? I believe there is.

Group dynamics and language classrooms

Every teacher knows that different classroom groups have a different "feel." Classroom groups respond to lessons differently and relate to one another differently. This is evidence of group dynamics. Group dynamics is all the interrelationships in the classroom and how those relationships change over the course of time. Guiding the dynamics of a group is one goal among others a teacher has for a group of students.

People act differently when they are in a group; being in a group influences our behavior. And groups of all kinds have been found to have common features. Therefore groups have been a field of study within the social sciences. The study of group dynamics has shaped management team strategy in business and group therapy practices in psychotherapy. Over the last ten years some language teachers have been observing, writing about and using group dynamics in the L2 classroom.

The interest in group dynamics comes from the hope of seeing a group of individuals cooperate together and perform more productively than they can as individuals. The aim of group dynamics is often described as a cohesive group. Cohesion is a positive whole-group feeling, a sense of being bonded together to work towards a common goal (Senior, 1997). Our aim as teachers is not group unity necessarily, but a classroom group that has developed trust and can cooperate on language goals.

In the language classroom good group dynamics can help build a social environment in which students will cooperate with classmates on interactive tasks and thus be able to focus on learning. Researchers find an increase in quantity and quality of speaking in classrooms where students experience good social dynamics.

Rose Senior is an Australian researcher and teacher of English as a foreign language. Senior's research has focused on observing what experienced language teachers actually do in the classroom. Senior found that these teachers have an intuitive understanding that classroom groups characterized by mutual support, a spirit of cohesiveness and a lack of fear are more effective environments for language learning to occur (Senior, 1997). Senior also interviewed students and found that students believed they can learn and practice language more effectively in classrooms where they feel safe and accepted (Senior, 1997).

A study of Hungarian high school students in EFL classes was conducted to assess motivation, anxiety and group cohesion (Clèment, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). Through detailed surveys of 300 students, the researchers found that students appraisal of the classroom's social environment influenced motivation to learn. A good classroom social atmosphere was found to increase student involvement and self confidence, while lowering anxiety.

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If a positive social atmosphere is developed in the classroom, students will be more involved in language use with their peers and be able to learn and perform to their potential. This is the allure of working on classroom dynamics; students can grow to their potential as language learners.

Teenage student needs

For teenage students school is much more than a place to learn—it is their social world. Relationships with peers are all important. Students will go to extremes to win approval from the right people and to save face when self image is threatened. Teens feel anxiety when they enter a foreign language classroom where they might be asked to perform speaking that language in front of peers or might need to talk to people outside their peer group.

In Japan, junior and senior high school students are in a homeroom group where they know each other's names and faces. They may be together for all of their classes and spend social time together. But with familiarity there also are barriers of social status that limit students' ability to talk with each other.

University students are in the opposite situation; they don't know their classmates and may not have any connection with them. An English professor at Fuji Women's College surveyed her students and found that even though they would like to meet others in the class, they would not initiate talk with someone in the class they do not know (Itoh, 1998). Shyness and social inhibition are barriers for language students in Japan.

At an American university, a study in foreign language classrooms was done to evaluate the impact of group dynamics (Morris & Tarone, 2003). The students revealed dislike of some classmates, avoiding people of a different language level, annoyance with lower level students, and other hidden social barriers. The study found that when students perceive negative personal attitudes at the social level their ability to perform and perceive language decreases. "If learners accurately perceive negative personal attitudes at the social level, their ability to accurately perceive at the linguistic level may diminish" (Morris & Tarone, 2003, p. 359).

Anxiety, shyness, social barriers, and negative attributions of classmates all distract students from what the teacher is trying to do in the classroom. When students' basic needs for safety, belonging and self-esteem are not met their attention is drawn to these needs and away from the content of the lesson (Jones & Jones, 2001). What a language student needs is a teacher who will shape the social environment so that it becomes a safe place to try out the target language.

Language learning is a social and cognitive process, particularly when language learning involves oral communication, interaction and communicative tasks. The research and writing on group dynamics have shown that teachers can shape the social conditions for language learning.

I teach in a senior high school where I am only one of many teachers a student has. My students only spend 45 minutes a week in my classroom. Can I influence the classroom groups' social dynamics? I admit some situations are beyond my influence. Yet, I have seen classes change from being poor learning environments to good ones.

The process of building good group dynamics

Group dynamics exist in a classroom even before the teacher begins to teach. On the first day students are sizing up one another and guarding their own actions carefully. When the teacher begins to talk the interrelationship between the teacher and the students starts: like or dislike, anxiety or expectation. The teacher is the leader of the classroom group. By words and action the teacher can shape the group from the first day.

Forming good classroom dynamics

In the formation period of a classroom group there are three priorities: educational goals, classroom norms and accepting relationships.

Educational goals

Learning a foreign language is a never-ending road with few milestones along the way to mark progress. Therefore short-term goals can be used as the milestones that the class can work towards accomplishing. In many language classes there are students of differing abilities. Common goals, attainable by all, can function to help individuals overlook individual differences. In order for students to understand the goals, addressing learner beliefs or "misbeliefs" about language learning may be needed.

Classroom norms

These are the rules for accepted classroom behavior. Explicit explanation can be used to describe the interactive, trial-and-error type classroom behavior that is unusual to students in a traditional academic institution but is necessary for language learning. I give my students a handout entitled, "OC is a safe place to practice English" to describe the ground rules of my oral communication class. Explaining the norms is the first step, which must be followed by the teacher modeling the norms and maintaining them.

The first class for my first year students is an important one. I tell them that learning to speak English is like learning to play a sport; it uses the mind and the body. I use tennis as my example, pull out a racket, a tennis textbook and make some balls out of crumpled paper. I mimic learning tennis, looking at the book, making mistakes, practicing form. I emphasize that I can't become good alone; I need a partner. I don't need a tennis pro to play with, just someone at my level. This emphasizes an educational goal of speaking with classmates and some of the class norms, such as accepting mistakes.

Accepting relationships

Students who accept each other are the foundation of a safe classroom. Among students there will be natural attraction to some students and feelings of dislike toward others. If unattended the group will fragment and uncooperative cliques may develop. Dörnyei and Murphey emphasize that cohesiveness can develop even among classmates who at first disliked one another (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The teacher must incorporate activities to help the students accept everyone in the classroom group as a co-learner. Acceptance will not happen naturally.

Acceptance can be developed in the following ways:

- Help the students get to know one another. In the beginning, low risk self-disclosure activities will help students to learning about each other. Allow students to "warm-up" their relationships in their native language and then "warm-up" their minds to the foreign language. Typical information gathering tasks can have a pedagogic purpose (ex. asking for information) and a social purpose (learning about classmates). Students' personal narratives can be used in storytelling tasks that help to deepen relationships along with adding interesting content. A webpage can be used for communication during school breaks.

- Learn names. When a teacher learns the students' names their interest in the class increases. Students should also be given activities to help them learn each other's names as preparation to communicating with them.

- Promote frequent interaction. Activities can be planned that cause students to physically move and talk with other students. Retelling stories, repeating dialogs, redoing tasks can all be used to cause students to interact with several classmates. This demonstrates the value of accepting every member of the group.

- Cooperate on a whole group task. Giving the students a task in which they need to work together to accomplish a task highlights interdependence and encourages a sense of unity towards a common goal. For example, have students poll their classmates on "a food we like," "an activity we did during vacation," etc., to create a class identity, such as, "We are a class that likes to eat ___ and during vacation did ___."

- Hold inter-group competitions. Activities that involve competition between small groups within the class can also cause students to work together and accept others as part of their team. For example, students in one row compete against the other rows, in a game where target words are described by gestures only to team members until guessed. I have found that my high school students are most engaged in learning when they are playing a slightly competitive fun game. They get caught up in the fun and before they know it they have cooperated with someone new and learned something!

By helping students get to know one another as fellow learners of English and by establishing class norms the classroom group is on the way to being a group with good group dynamics. As students experience accepting relationships in which to practice English trust will grow.

Maintaining good group dynamics

Helping students get to know one another is something that probably most teachers do instinctively. Yet, maintaining good group dynamics through out the year is a challenge. Senior found that experienced teachers were constantly giving time to group dynamics in their classrooms (Senior,

1997). Growing trust and cooperation on educational goals are the key elements of a cohesive classroom group. Group cohesion occurs when there is a relational environment in which members cooperate with each other toward a common learning goal. A cohesive classroom is more than just a pleasant environment, but one that leads to higher performance.

But, as students get to know one another better differences, rivalries and jockeying for different roles in the class may occur. Teachers should take these problems as opportunities to re-emphasize the goals of the class and the norms to ensure that everyone can progress toward these goals. Dörnyei and Murphey's (2003) book has a troubleshooting section that addresses many problems that can occur in a classroom group. Different roles can be given to students to help the class group function. For example, the student who disrupts to get attention can be the teacher's demonstration partner, and thus receive attention while helping the class.

Ohl and Cates have written an article that suggests that three things are important for developing group dynamics in the language classroom: 1) help the group perceive themselves as a group, 2) plan activities that cause students to be interdependent, and 3) design tasks to include socio-emotional bonding time (Ohl & Cates, 2006).

I use changing seating arrangements as a way to show students I am serious about creating a good social environment for everyone to learn. After about two months of class I ask the students to fill out a small form to tell me three people they would like for a partner. Then I take their requests and remake the seating chart. My aim is to make partners that are friends and of similar English level, while at the same time separating disruptive relationships. The new seating chart always seems to raise the level of trust students have in me. They realize I want the whole class to enjoy speaking in English. Many students do enjoy the social and learning environment created and at the end of the school year have said, "I will miss this class."

Learning to speak a foreign language requires risk-taking and relationships. When the students have trust in me and in each other they can participate without fear. They are focused on the content and their manner of relating to one another supports the goals of the class. They are rewarded with enjoyment and success. I too am rewarded by seeing students perform their best.

Cheryl Kirchhoff enjoys finding ways to motivate Japanese young people to learn English.

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