Co-creating group norms in the language classroom

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Reference data:

Coomber, M. (2011). Co-creating group norms in the language classroom. In A. Stewart (Ed.), *JALT2010 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Norms of behaviour operate within social groupings of all types and sizes; those which are established within the classroom can have either a positive or negative impact on the creation of a successful learning environment. While some norms may be explicitly codified by institutions and be non-negotiable, others are created by teachers, learners, or a combination of the two. Allowing students an explicit voice in the negotiation and creation of classroom behavioural norms can encourage them to take ownership of their learning. However, offering unlimited freedom of decision involves a variety of risks. By using *controlled democracy* to follow a middle path between the extremes of a teacher-led and student-led classroom, teachers can offer learners a significant level of input into the construction of behavioural norms. This paper examines the use of this method, the extent to which student choices coincide with teacher preferences, and the implications for classroom practice.

行動規範は、あらゆる種類や規模の社会集団の中で機能する。教室の中で確立された規範は、優れた学習環境の構築に与える影響は、有益にも不利益にもなりうる。規範によっては、各種学校によって明文化され、交渉の余地がないものもあれば、教師、学習者、または両者合同によって作られたるものもある。教室における行動規範の交渉と作成にあたっては、学習者にはっきりと発言をさせる場を与えることにより、学習者が学習に責任を持つようになることを奨励できる。しかし、決定に無制限の自由を与えることは、さまざまなリスクをはらんでいる。「統制された民主主義」を通して、教師主体の授業と生徒主体の授業の中間のアプローチを取るなら、教師は、行動規範の作成における学習者の参加レベルをかなり向上させることができる。

Breen's (1985) influential conceptualization of the language classroom as a coral garden sought to emphasize the complex, varied and dynamic nature of classroom life. Every participant, teacher and learner, brings with them into the classroom their own individual experiences, beliefs, hopes and fears; thus, the classroom cultures which emerge from the interaction of these factors are potentially limitless. As any experienced teacher well knows, no two classrooms are the same. While some develop into productive learning environments, others, for reasons that are often difficult to discern, are less successful. In all classrooms, the characteristics and actions of participants shape the group culture which develops. This interaction, however, is not a random process. The classroom is a managed environment, subject to written and implied rules, which are often developed with the specific intent of influencing the emerging classroom culture. While effective classroom management does not, of course, guarantee learning, poor classroom management can go a long way towards precluding it.

Classroom management

Traditional concepts of classroom management have tended to focus firstly on issues of control, viewing management skills as a set of tools to be deployed by the teacher in order to pre-empt or deal with problem behaviours, and secondly on those of organization, with the teacher's management skills crucial to the smooth running of the lesson.

Wright (2006) identifies several shortcomings of this model, namely, that (1) order does not automatically lead to learning, and may on occasion inhibit it, (2) learners, not only teachers, have a significant role to play in controlling what goes on in the classroom, and (3) the classroom is, in reality, a contested domain. Wright proposes what he terms an opportunity view of classroom management, a more holistic framework encompassing five elements of classroom life: time, space, engagement, participation and resources. The focus is on care and responsibility rather than control and obedience. In this view, rather than being imposed by the teacher, order should be negotiated between learners and teachers. Schmuck and Schmuck (1992) quote an elementary school teacher who successfully adopted similar principles to transform a difficult class:

> I learned to share power with the children to an extent I had never thought possible . . . A class that was once so uncontrolled that we could accomplish little has come through several developmental stages . . .The children use self-control when they are capable of it; when they aren't, I am their control. (p. 129)

Whatever the benefits of this approach, it is clear to the practicing teacher that there are limits to what can and cannot be negotiated in terms of classroom management. Teachers work under a variety of constraints, be they institutional, social or practical, and these constraints largely determine what aspects of classroom life are negotiable in a given teaching situation. For example, educational institutions at all levels set policies regarding issues such as attendance and grading; social rules, such as those governing male-female interaction, may limit the ways in which classroom life can be organized; lastly, physical constraints, including classroom size and furniture, also influence what is or is not possible. Although the concept of a negotiated classroom order thus does not imply that everything must be up for grabs, the logic of involving students in classroom management decisions when possible is intuitively attractive. One of the potentially most productive areas open to negotiation is the establishment of group norms.

Group norms

Norms are the implicit rules which govern our behaviour in groups at all levels, ranging from those influencing one-to-one interactions to those that operate at the societal level. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998 cited in Dörnyei, 2001, p. 39) describe group norms in the classroom as "specify[ing] acceptable behaviour in the class group and contribut[ing] to conditions . . . assumed to be optimal for effective learning". At this point it is worth considering the distinction made by Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren (1990) between injunctive norms, which relate to what most people think should happen, and descriptive norms, which are concerned with what, in reality, most people actually do. It is clear that, although an injunctive norm may specify acceptable behaviour in the classroom, only a descriptive norm will contribute to optimal learning conditions. While the two types of norm are closely related, and may often coincide, this is not universally so.

Research in social psychology has indicated that people will go to considerable lengths to conform to group norms, even when their personal inclination runs directly contrary to that of the group. Moreover, this tendency has repeatedly been found to be more pronounced in collectivist cultures, in which

conformity to the group is valued as a positive trait (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). Due to the particular power of the group in Japan (Kelly, 2001) the importance of fostering positive, constructive norms in the Japanese classroom cannot be underestimated. Once a norm becomes established within a group there is a tendency, whether the norm is positive or negative, for it to become self-perpetuating. Many teachers will have experienced classes in which norms of mediocrity, silence, or default L1 use have taken root. The difficulty of overcoming such counter-productive norms once they have set in renders it all the more important that teachers focus on promoting productive norms in their classes from the outset.

Creating positive classroom norms

Given the importance of norms in governing individual behaviour and influencing group dynamics, it seems clear that the norms which become established in the classroom are likely to exert a major influence on the development of the learning environment. In light of this, Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) pose a critical question when they ask "How can we make sure that the norms in our classrooms promote rather than hinder learning?" (p. 36). Three potential routes seem open to the teacher concerned with this issue:

1. Follow a traditional model, whereby the teacher unilaterally outlines norms to be observed and attempts to enforce these.
2. Allow norms to develop organically amongst the students, with little or no input from the teacher.
3. Without explicit direction, covertly guide the students towards constructing positive norms that are acceptable to the teacher.

Which option is the most appropriate will be determined by factors including the age of the students and the prevailing educational culture. In a large class of elementary school children in a teacher-centred culture, option one is the most likely, and perhaps the most practical. Conversely, option two would appear more appropriate for a small class of fee-paying adults at a private language school. In many other situations, option three, by enabling teachers and learners to jointly construct classroom norms, offers significant advantages.

Co-creating group norms: three methods

Both Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) and Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) suggest that early in the life of a class, teachers should propose and explain their preferred norms, then give learners the opportunity to discuss these before coming to a mutual agreement on their suitability. I have employed a variation on this method in the past, in which students discuss and select the most appropriate norm from a multiple choice exercise offering three alternatives. Both these methods, it will be noted, while involving learners in explicit discussion of norms, fail to offer them a voice in creating these norms. In each case, possible norms are generated by the teacher and presented to the students. In the Japanese classroom, it would be a rare student indeed, especially during the first lesson of a course, who questioned the suggestions of the teacher regarding classroom management. While in some educational cultures these methods may lead to a genuine exchange of views, in Japan it is more likely that this exercise will simply serve to rubber-stamp what are seen as the teacher's preferences.

A third option, which I term *controlled democracy*, is for the teacher to ask students to come up with their own ideas for appropriate classroom norms, and then take a vote to decide which of these to adopt. In this way, rather than simply discussing or choosing from teacher-generated suggestions, learners are empowered to take responsibility for offering their own input.

The democratic classroom

Advantages

Many Japanese students arrive at university having experienced neither an English class under the sole control of a foreign teacher, nor one in which they are expected to communicate entirely in the target language. Empowering learners to participate in classroom decision making can serve to underline the fact that expectations have changed, that their university life will not simply be a four-year extension of high school, and that they are now required to take greater responsibility for the management of their own learning. Creating successful autonomous learners is one of the key goals of university education. It would thus seem incongruous to expect students to competently manage their own learning outside the classroom while simultaneously denying the same students any such role within the classroom. An exercise in classroom democracy during the first lesson can set the tone for the remainder of the course, indicating early on that the role of the learner will not be that of a passive recipient of knowledge, but an active contributor to the lesson.

Senior (1997) notes that a well-bonded group promotes efficient learning and boosts the confidence of students otherwise reluctant to speak in English. While the building of a positive group dynamic is, of course, a complex and on-going process, by beginning a course with a democratic and inclusive activity, teachers can go some way towards promoting a sense of group identity.

Finally, norms which are self determined are more likely to be adhered to than those which are externally imposed. When learners have a voice in the construction of a norm, each individual, as well as the group as a whole, gains a sense of ownership of that norm, and thus a greater motivation to regulate behaviour without the need for teacher input. Self-generated norms therefore have a greater power than imposed norms, are more likely to be fully internalized, and more likely to be maintained.

Potential problems

For many teachers and students, shared responsibility for classroom management may create unfamiliar and potentially uncomfortable roles. A teacher who is used to acting as a unilateral class manager may feel threatened when that role is seemingly compromised (Allwright, 1984), or fear that relinquishing control will allow the development of inappropriate norms. Students too, are more accustomed to teacher fronted classrooms, and may therefore feel confused at being invited to overtly contribute to classroom management. In an educational culture where teacher and student roles are usually clearly delineated, learners may even believe that the teacher is abrogating their professional responsibility.

Practical objections to classroom democracy may also be voiced. Both peer group pressure and the potential dominance of more socially or linguistically confident individuals may result in some learners being reluctant to make their voices heard; these learners may thus feel they have no personal stake in the norms created, undermining the value of the exercise. Democratic decision making also has implications beyond the individual classroom which must be considered. In their decisions regarding classroom management policies, teachers have a responsibility to their colleagues. Creating and following norms which are radically different from those usually found in a university classroom may thus cause difficulties for other teachers; regardless of the teacher's intent, it is inevitable that the group dynamics which develop in one lesson will permeate into others taken by the same group of learners.

The challenge

While a student-led classroom sounds attractive in principle, the teacher's primary duty is to provide an optimum learning experience for all learners. For the reasons discussed above, pursuit of this goal precludes the possibility of entirely devolving responsibility for classroom management to the students. What is needed, then, is a system which can harness the potential benefits of classroom democracy while at the same time minimizing the possible risks. The remainder of this paper considers a small scale study in controlled democracy, through which learners can be empowered to take a more active role in the creation of their own classroom environment without marginalizing the role of the teacher.

Controlled democracy in practice

Most teachers will have experienced classes in which, despite their best efforts, negative norms have developed. I identified seven situations (see Appendix 1) in which, during previous courses I have taught, counterproductive norms have often predominated. My norm-building activity thus focuses on these situations in an attempt to pre-empt problems through the construction of positive group norms.

Procedure

1. In the first lesson of the course, students work in small groups, and are given a copy of the handout shown in Appendix 1. After reading the situations, they discuss what would be the best course of action in each, come to a group decision, and write their idea in the first box.
2. When all groups have completed the worksheet, the teacher allocates one situation to each group, and asks that group to write their idea for that situation on the board.
3. The teacher then adds an alternative suggestion to the board alongside those suggested by the students, giving a choice of two possible norms: one generated by the learners, one by the teacher.
4. Students vote on which option should become the injunctive norm for the class. Group leaders write the class choice in the second box of their handout.
5. The teacher collects the handouts, makes copies for each group member, and distributes these the following week. All learners now have a written record of the democratically chosen norms.

When following this method, two potential problems arise: the risk of an inappropriate norm being chosen, and a possible reluctance on the part of learners to oppose what they feel to be the teacher's preference. However, steps 2 and 3 of the procedure outlined above can be easily manipulated to circumvent these problems.

For most of the seven situations, there is little variation in the ideas groups produce during step 2. For example, Situation 1 (The teacher asks you something, but you don't understand the question. What should you do?) usually generates responses such as "We should say 'Can you repeat the question?'", which is, of course, the positive norm that I would like to develop. More often than not, at least one group comes up with a suitable option. Thus, by careful allocation of situations to groups, it is relatively simple to ensure that the first option presented on the board is a suitable one, thereby reducing the likelihood of an inappropriate norm being chosen.

Step 3, the addition of the teacher's alternative option, can be used to help overcome both potential problems. Firstly, on the rare occasions that no group comes up with a suitable idea for a particular situation, the teacher's input ensures that the class will at least have the option of selecting a positive norm. Secondly, use of a humorous or obviously inappropriate suggestion

can make it clear to learners that they should not automatically select the option presented by the teacher, but make a decision based on what they genuinely believe to be the best option. This also provides an opportunity to mention negative norms that commonly evolve during classes, and stress that these should be avoided. For example, if the student generated suggestion for Situation 1 is, as above, "We should say 'Can you repeat the question?'", the teacher can add "Say nothing" as the alternative option, a choice which students are well aware is not suitable. In this way, learners realize they must assess each option on its merits, regardless of the source from which it originated.

Voting outcomes

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of controlled democracy in (1) constructing appropriate norms and (2) allowing students a genuine voice in their construction, I recorded the choices and voting patterns of five first-year university classes, comprising 80 students in total, in which learners followed the controlled democracy procedure to agree class norms. The activity was conducted in English during the first lesson of the first semester. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Class decisions

Number of classes that chose…	Situation number						
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Teacher's preferred option	4	1	3	4	2	3	4
A different but suitable option	1	4	2	0	3	0	1
A less suitable option	0	0	0	1	0	2	0

From Table 1 it can be seen that these students overwhelmingly made appropriate choices: of the 35 total decisions, 21 coincided with the norm that I would myself have chosen, 11 were slightly different, but entirely acceptable choices, and only 3 were what I considered to be less suitable options. Even in these three cases, the norms chosen by the class were not ones likely to have a seriously negative impact upon the learning environment, suggesting that teachers have little to fear from allowing their students a role in decisions regarding classroom management.

Table 2. Voting patterns

Class	Votes for option one / Votes for option two						
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Class 1	14/0	10/4	8/6	14/0	14/0	11/3	10/4
Class 2	11/0	11/0	9/2	11/0	11/0	9/2	7/2
Class 3	13/0	7/6	8/5	9/4	13/0	9/4	13/0
Class 4	12/0	12/0	12/0	12/0	12/0	12/0	12/0
Class 5	27/3	30/0	27/3	22/8	17/8	17/12	30/0

Table 2 shows the distribution of votes in each class. In all classes bar one, there were differences of opinion between class members: only Class 4 voted unanimously on each situation. Also worthy of note is that in situation 1, 77 out of 80 students voted for the suitable student generated option, rather than the unsuitable teacher generated one. Both these observations seem to indicate that learners took the exercise seriously and attempted to make thoughtful decisions based on their own views, rather than simply voting in line with what they perceived the teacher or their classmates to consider the "right" answer.

Student views

At the end of the semester, I administered a brief survey, consisting of two open-ended questions and two Likert scale items, in

order to collect student opinions on the way in which we had formulated group norms. Students completed the surveys outside class, which unfortunately meant that the response rate was fairly low. The survey results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Open questions

	Yes	No	Don't know
1. Do you think it was useful to talk about these situations in the first class? Why or why not?	24	2	0
2. Do you think this was a good way to decide on suitable actions? Why or why not?	27	0	3

Table 4. Likert statement items

	Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3. Deciding guidelines for classroom behaviour is the teacher's job	1	6	19	6	5	2
4. Students should be able to give their opinions about behaviour guidelines	5	13	12	2	2	0

As can be seen from Table 3, the students who completed the survey overwhelmingly approved of both discussing and voting on group norms. Three common threads emerged from the learners' comments on question 1, indicating that they thought the discussion useful in clarifying rules ("Yes, I do. Deciding rules is very important, I think"), providing an orientation to university expectations ("Yes, because I didn't know anything about the classes in the university. So it was a good way to know about it"), and encouraging interaction among group members ("Yes, because it's a good chance to communicate each other").

Question 2 generated similarly positive feedback, indicating that learners valued the inclusion of all class members in the process of norm construction, with comments including "Yes, because the choice decided by discussion is usually composed many person's idea" and "I think this was a good way because we could know everyone's opinion." Only one student contributed a comment questioning the value of the exercise, noting that "I don't know because sometimes we might all be wrong".

Table 4 suggests that students may hold opinions which, on the surface, could appear to be in conflict. While 66.67% of respondents agreed that deciding guidelines for classroom behavior is the teacher's job, almost 90% felt that students should also be able to give their opinions. Of course, there is no actual inconsistency here: simply a recognition that both teacher and learner have a role to play in the creation of norms in the language classroom.

Conclusion

The learners who participated in this study overwhelmingly exercised their votes responsibly to select positive group norms; although the small scale of the study means that these results cannot be generalized, this seems to suggest that at university level students can be entrusted with an explicit role in co-constructing their own learning environment. Teachers, however, can retain a significant role in shaping classroom management, yet do so from the back seat, allowing students to take the lead

in decision making. Almost unanimously, the students who responded to the survey expressed positive opinions about the procedure employed, with comments indicating that they valued active involvement in the negotiation of classroom norms.

Though the outcome of this study indicates that joint construction of norms is both practical and desirable, it is necessary to note that the method of controlled democracy described is not without drawbacks. Needless to say, it is not appropriate to all teaching contexts: learners less mature or less committed to their studies than those described may use their input to make unsuitable choices, leaving the teacher in the unenviable position of either having to overrule a democratic decision, or allow potentially counterproductive norms develop. Teachers must use their experience and detailed knowledge to assess the applicability of the method in their own teaching context. Even in the positive scenario described in this paper, the method is not problem free: having different classes adopt different norms, even if all are appropriate, can easily confuse a teacher used to running all classes the same way. However, through subtle manipulation of the democratic process, this problem can be largely circumvented.

Finally, although focusing attention on a norm has been shown to promote normative behaviour (Cialdini, Reno & Kallgren, 1990) it should be pointed out that even democratic discussion and selection of an injunctive norm offers no guarantee that it will become a descriptive norm, which is, of course, the ultimate goal of the exercise. Although an explicit norm-building activity, especially one in which learners have a genuine input, is likely to promote this outcome, setting the norm is only the first step; it must also be maintained for the duration of the course of study. The clear advantage of a co-constructed norm is that learners, having been party to an injunctive norm's adoption, have a greater stake in ensuring it becomes a descriptive norm.

Bio data

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Appendix 1

Problem situations in the classroom

Work in small groups. Read the following situations, discuss them with your group members, decide what you should do, and write your group's idea in the box.

1. The teacher asks you something, but you don't understand the question. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

2. The teacher asks you a question, but you don't know the answer. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

3. You arrive to class late because your train was delayed. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

4. The teacher has given you homework, but you don't understand what to do. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

5. The homework deadline is today, but you haven't done the homework. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

6. You have done the homework, but you feel sick so can't go to class today. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice:

7. You've forgotten your textbook. What should you do?

Our group's idea:

Class choice: