

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Cohesion: Interweaving threads in the classroom

Steven Paydon
Tokai University

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When students do not feel secure enough in the student-centered communicative classroom to communicate with each other, learning is compromised. Conversely, when they do feel secure, learning is enhanced. Based on this premise, teachers stand to benefit from developing classroom cohesion. The social relationships formed between the students are the basis of this cohesion. If cohesion can be developed, students will be more willing to interact with their peers, which creates a positive classroom dynamic that increases the effectiveness of lessons. This article examines the theory behind cohesion, and how it can be applied in the classroom.

教室において学生間でコミュニケーションを取る際、学生が安心感保つことができない場合、その学習効果は譲歩されてしまう。反対に、安心感をもてると学習効果は高まる。この前提のに基づき、教員は教室内に発生する一体感の恩恵を受ける立場にある。学生間の教室内での人間関係がこの一体感の根幹である。もし、一体感が高められれば、学生はより積極的にクラスメートと交流をはかるようになり、それが授業の効果を高めるためのよい教室内の相互作用を生み出す。本稿は一体感がどのように教室内の相互作用に影響するかを分析し、また一体感がL2教室内でどのように高められるかを検証する。

In the field of psychotherapy, group dynamics play an integral part of group therapy. In order to achieve any positive change in group therapy, the therapist must be able to recognize the manifestations of group dynamics. They must be able to diagnose, analyze, and intervene in order to deliberately influence their group. This deliberate manipulation of the group dynamics permits therapists to facilitate the development of their group into a tool of effective therapy. Without an understanding of group dynamics, the therapist's role is reduced to simply that of individual therapy in the presence of a group. Moreover, if the therapist is unable to foster a good group dynamic, then they too are just as susceptible to negative group influences as any other member of the group (Agazarian & Peters, 1981).



This relationship between group therapy and group dynamics can also be applied to the student-centered communicative classroom. Through understanding group dynamics in the classroom, teachers can maximize their students' output. By observing, recognizing, and deliberately influencing positive group dynamics, the teacher can mold the class into a tool of more effective and more efficient learning. Moreover, just as the therapist's role is reduced without an understanding of group dynamics, so too is the teacher's role reduced to merely that of a person talking in front of a group, and so too can they become just as influenced by poor group dynamics as any other member of the group.

This paper focuses on the central element of group dynamics known as cohesion, and draws on theory from a wide variety of disciplines. It looks at what cohesion is, why it is important, and how it can be developed in the L2 classroom. The basic premise in regard to cohesion's place in a student-centered communicative classroom is that if the students do not feel comfortable enough to talk to each other, then learning is going to be compromised.

The need to belong

Kurt Lewin, the man acknowledged as the "father" of group dynamics (Cartwright & Zander, 1968), maintained that an individual's behavior is a product of the person's interaction with their perceived environment, and instigated the idea that group dynamics are both the powerful processes that influence individuals in group situations and the study of those processes (see Lewin 1948, 1951). Understanding group dynamics is important because a deliberate plan to develop good group dynamics, or a cohesive group,

will significantly assist the teacher to develop a positive classroom atmosphere. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) advocate, group dynamics is an important, perhaps the most important, language teaching discipline a teacher can know. In Dörnyei and Malderez (1997), this idea is taken further when they point out that the time invested in developing group dynamics will pay off in learning outcomes. Kirchhoff (2007) then goes on to draw the link between group dynamics and cohesion when she indicates that the aim of group dynamics is often described as a cohesive group.

Cohesion provides students with an environment conducive to language learning. Safety and security are of the utmost importance in the language classroom. When students perceive their environment as hostile or unsafe, their focus is mainly on keeping themselves out of trouble. Consequently, the tendency then is to avoid taking risks in trying to speak the target language in front of their peers. When this happens, the classroom environment is discouraging the students from engaging (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). However, when they do feel safe and secure in the classroom, their energy, their resources, and their focus move towards more social goals (Paydon, 2006). Clément et al (1994), for example, found that a good classroom atmosphere increases student involvement and self-confidence, while lowering anxiety, and Senior (1997) found that students feel less vulnerable and less anxious about practicing the target language when they feel safe and accepted.

Trust is the key aspect of a cohesive group. Elite sports provide a good example of the central role trust plays with respect to cohesion. Ray McLean (2006), whose work

improving team performance has brought success to a significant number of Australia's highest profile national and international sports teams, tells us that trust lies at the heart of any functioning, cohesive team. Trust is the confidence among a team's members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no need to be defensive or careful around the group. McLean (2006) further testifies that teams lacking in trust waste too much time and energy on managing their behaviors and interactions within the group. This is also the case in the language class. Hadfield (1992) contends that when the students trust each other, they are more willing to take risks and interact. She also points out that it is important for group members to feel support, acceptance, and encouragement from the group, and explains that "feelings of insecurity play a large part in the build up of a negative group atmosphere" (p. 80). She goes on to warn us that if a climate of trust is not given the time and encouragement to develop, then a group of students who simply start off lacking in self-confidence can become negative and unfriendly.

The interpersonal relationships the students develop in the classroom are the basis of trust. These interpersonal relationships are the social connections, the associations, and the friendships formed between the people who make up the group. As such, they influence how the members of a class interact with each other. Each time a student builds a relationship with another student, they become bound together.

In this way, developing cohesion is like weaving a tapestry. Imagine that each student has a piece of string. Each time that student forms a relationship with another student, they become bound together with that piece of string. Now if the

teacher is constantly having students change partners so that all the students get a chance to build a relationship with all the other students, then these interconnected relationships start to resemble the weaving of a tapestry. If you tug the corner of a tapestry, the rest will follow, and this is also how a cohesive class will react.

The opposite state of cohesion is fragmentation. If a conscious effort to develop cohesion is not made, the group will fragment and cliques will develop (Kirchhoff, 2007). In a fragmented class, students do not experience themselves as part of a group; rather, they think of themselves only as individuals. When they think of themselves as individuals, they have no group loyalty, their interactions are aimed at their own needs and, because of this, they tend to form subgroups and cliques to satisfy these needs (Erhman & Dörnyei, 1998). As Forsythe (1990) says: "... without some minimal level of cohesiveness the group members would simply drift apart" (p. 11).

Fragmented classes are not uncommon in Japan. A common example teachers experience in this country is their students' reluctance to talk to each other. This frustrating situation is often the result of the students' lack of experience in a student-centered communicative classroom on one level and, on a deeper level, it is a product of them feeling too insecure, as mentioned previously, to take risks. Kirchhoff (2007) explains that our students need a teacher who will "... shape the social environment so that it becomes a safe place to try out the target language" (p. 615), and also asserts that our aim as teachers is to cultivate a classroom group that has developed trust and can cooperate. Developing trust brings the students together as one group. It makes the classroom

environment less threatening through providing feelings of safety and security. Once students feel safe and secure, their energy shifts to more social goals. Consequently, when the students feel more sociable and more willing to interact, rather than just trying to stay out of trouble, the classroom atmosphere becomes more conducive to learning.

Cohesion also significantly aids motivation. Humans are social animals. Just as cows herd together and birds flock together, humans tend to belong to groups. Within us there is a powerful, fundamental, motivational drive to form and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships. We want to be accepted and feel as if we belong. Whether it be to clubs, work groups, sports teams or our community, we need to feel liked and accepted by others. So long as our interpersonal relationships within our groups are rewarding, then we are motivated to pursue them. Conversely, if they are not rewarding, then the motivation to pursue them decreases (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The power behind this motivational drive to form rewarding relationships can be harnessed in the language classroom, for embedded within it is an opportunity that the teacher can exploit with target language tasks. For example, if one of the goals of a language task is to develop a relationship, then the activity becomes less of a task and more rewarding for the learner because of the positive affect associated with that activity.

The following list is a summary describing ways cohesion aids motivation. This list has been developed from ideas found in Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994), Dörnyei (2001a; 2001b), Dörnyei and Malderez (1997), Dörnyei and Murphey (2003), Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998), Hadfield (1992), Kirchhoff (2007), and Paydon (2006).

- Members of cohesive classes feel obligated to the group.
- Members of cohesive classes feel responsible for the group's success.
- Members of cohesive classes will exert extra effort for peers they hold in esteem.
- Members of cohesive classes observe group norms and resist class disruption.
- Members of cohesive groups actively support each other.
- A cohesive group works more efficiently and productively than a non-cohesive group.
- Good classroom atmosphere promotes student involvement and activity while moderating anxiety and promoting self-confidence.
- A positive and accepting group atmosphere will affect the members' morale and self-image.
- Belonging to a good group brings gratification.

Basically, a cohesive group provides its members with rewarding interpersonal relationships. It gives them an identity, a sense of belonging, and a safe and secure environment in which they can focus on the group's goals, rather than their own individual needs; it provides them with an environment where they can test their boundaries and grow as people. In many ways, cohesion is a powerful, motivational aid in the classroom. Indeed, as Kirchhoff states, "A cohesive classroom is more than just a pleasant

environment, but one that leads to higher performance” (2007, p. 619).

To summarize this section, positive interpersonal relationships are the basis of cohesion, cohesion aids motivation, and this is important because motivated students learn more.

Developing cohesion

Generally speaking, during the first few times a class meets, things usually go pretty well—at least on the surface. But the reality is that at this time in a group’s life, the students are generally on their best behavior. What they are really doing is looking for approval and acceptance, or at least a comfortable place within the group. As Yalom (1995, cited in Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) points out, social interactions at this point in time often resemble cocktail party talk. What is really happening under the surface is a lot of structuring and organization. Within the short space of the first few lessons, roles and hierarchies will evolve in the group and a structure and norm system will be established (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). It is therefore imperative to influence the group dynamic early, so that cohesion can be developed across the whole group, and positive, rather than negative, group structures can evolve.

Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) allege that negative perceptions of a person usually arise from not knowing the person. It follows logically that the more the students get to know each other, the more positive their perceptions of each other should become, and the more they should begin to trust each other. The teacher therefore needs to provide

students with opportunities to get to know each other, to build interpersonal relationships with all the members of the class and, if not to be liked by every class member, at least to feel accepted by them. Shaping the social environment so that the students accept each other can be seen as building a foundation from which learning will be facilitated. For a little investment in time building this foundation, the teacher can reap significant teaching rewards in student output because they will be ready to interact and learn. Without this foundation, their energies and their focus will be on keeping themselves out of trouble.

Three important elements in developing cohesion are proximity, contact, and interaction. Accordingly, the best way to start developing it is with a structured seating plan. Without some semblance of structure, cohesion will not develop as well as it could, and a structured seating plan provides a basis to build on. The distance between participants determines the feeling of intimacy, and physical closeness tends to lead to psychological closeness (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). MacLennon and Dies (1992) point out that the students shouldn’t be seated so close together that they might feel crowded, confined, or too close for their present state of intimacy. But neither should they sit too far apart. If there is too much space between members, they may experience feelings of insignificance, emptiness, isolation, and anxiety. All of which encourage the students to seek companionship with other classmates or friends near them who are also not in the group. This situation then encourages the development of territoriality, cliques, and gives the potential loners the chance to find a comfort zone separate from the group. However, cohesion will develop when the

students start to communicate; seating them reasonably close together, and equal distances apart, facilitates this. It also maximizes the ability for conversation to flow around and among the group, makes changing partners easy, ensures that nobody feels left out, and encourages that feeling of intimacy to develop.

Once the classroom is organized, it is time to start working on developing the cohesion. This paper looks at three useful methods. The first of these is *icebreakers*, activities designed to, as the name suggests, break the ice. The second type of activity is *warm-ups*. Ice tends to re-form if left alone, so *warm-ups* are designed to keep it moving around and flowing (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997). The final method is the use of *random grouping*. Similar to warm-ups, random grouping keeps relationships fluid and stops that ice from re-forming.

Icebreakers

Icebreakers are short activities used in the beginning of a course as a way to get students familiar with each other. They are designed to get them meeting, sharing information, and forming interpersonal relationships. For an icebreaker to work effectively, it must require students to change partners often; moreover, the task must be easy to accomplish and should not be too time-consuming. Most importantly, an icebreaker should aim to create a bond between the students. This last aim can be achieved by requiring students to find things they have in common. Cohesion grows out of a sense of liking amongst group members, usually resulting from discovering shared interests, which generally leads toward mutual acceptance (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Levine

& Moreland, 1990). In short, icebreakers facilitate the discovery of shared interests and similarities.

An example of an icebreaker is a simple question sheet. The exercise should require the students to learn each other's names, and share some information on common interests. Typical types of questions might be something like: "What is your favorite movie?" or "What is your blood type?" These kinds of questions are easy to answer and, more importantly, aim to connect students through similarities or shared interests.

Warm-ups

Warm-ups are used at the beginning of subsequent classes when the students have become familiar with each other. They resemble icebreakers in that they are short activities that should be easily achievable, and require the students to mix and develop interpersonal relationships, but also have some other benefits. One extra benefit is that they refocus students on the target language and prepare them for study. They further provide a good opportunity to review lexical or grammatical items from previous lessons. A typical warm-up activity is a *Find someone who ...* exercise where students are required to find a student who has, for example, been to America or Hokkaido. Through a warm-up activity, students can review lexical items and grammatical structure, refocus on the target language, get reacquainted, and get ready to participate in oral practice. Warm-ups are stimulating and set the mood for the class.

One more benefit related to icebreakers and warm-ups is that they provide a great opportunity for the teacher to learn

more about the students. Teachers can pick up a lot of useful information that they can use at opportune times in later classes and demonstrate that they are both listening to their students and showing an interest in them. When the teacher demonstrates that their students are important to them, it makes the students feel more important and good about themselves, giving them increased confidence and more motivation to interact and learn. Taking part in the activities is also a good chance for the students to get to know about you—the teacher. Just as sharing personal information builds bonds between the students, so too will it build bonds between the students and the teacher.

Random grouping

An activity that keeps the interpersonal relationships fluid is random grouping. The beauty of random grouping is that the students never know who their next partner is going to be. This means that they might be looking forward with anticipation to getting paired with some particular member in the group. Or, if this doesn't happen, they feel inclined to invest in all the group members anyway, rather than just one or two people they feel secure with, because they never know who their next partner might be. Random grouping also forces students to mix with classmates whom they may not usually choose to, thus creating the opportunity to continue building interpersonal relationships and developing that cohesion throughout the class. However, the most important and overriding benefit is that they keep the interpersonal relationships fluid and help prevent students from becoming territorial or forming cliques. The element of randomness also alleviates any feelings of manipulation the

students might feel if the teacher were choosing the students' partners for them.

There are many ways to group students with an element of randomness. A typical random pairing exercise is a bunch of cards, one for each student with each card being one of a pair. The content on the cards could be lexical review, grammar points, or simply matching famous people together. The students draw a card and have to find their partner holding the corresponding card. Thus the grouping is purely by chance.

In closing this section, if the classroom group is to function in a supportive manner, teachers must initially set aside time for activities that enable students to get to know each other, develop feelings of trust, inclusion, acceptance, and above all, create diverse patterns of friendship (Jones & Jones, 1995). In a cohesive class, everybody tends to stand closely together, sometimes bumping into each other, laughing, and generally having a good time. You can see they enjoy being together. When a class reaches this stage it becomes something like a group nirvana, and is a very rewarding experience for both the students and the teacher.

Conclusion

To summarize, this article examined the importance of cohesion in the student-centered communicative classroom. It looked at what cohesion is and how it binds students together through the development of interpersonal relationships. It also examined how important cohesion is in creating an environment conducive to learning, and the role it plays in motivation. Finally, the article investigated

ways to develop cohesion. In essence, this involves getting the students mixing, sharing personal information, and developing interpersonal relationships.

A cohesive class provides the students with a secure environment conducive to language learning. It allows them to feel safe enough to risk losing face and confident enough to test their boundaries, both of which allow students to develop their potential as language learners.

Steven Paydon has been teaching in Australia, Taiwan, and Japan since 1993. Since 2001 he has been working at Tokai University. His present research interests generally revolve around motivation, more specifically group dynamics, and presently are focused on cohesion.

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