



## GROUP DYNAMICS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

ZOLTÁN DÖRNYEI\* and ANGI MALDEREZ†

\**Department of English Applied Linguistics, Eötvös University, Budapest, Hungary*

†*School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, U.K.*

This paper highlights the importance of the dynamics of the learner group in shaping the L2 learning process. We argue that group characteristics and group processes significantly contribute to any success or failure in the L2 classroom, and therefore language teachers could potentially benefit from an awareness of the principles of group dynamics. First, we provide an overview of the aspects of classroom dynamics that we consider most relevant to L2 teaching. Then, based on the theoretical insights and our own teaching experience, we make practical suggestions for teachers on how to exploit the principles of group dynamics in their classrooms to good effect. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

### INTRODUCTION

Every practising foreign/second language (L2) teacher will have experienced occasions when something “goes wrong” with the class—e.g. conflicts or rebellious attitudes emerge, or there is sudden lethargy or complete unwillingness for cooperation on the students’ part—and the L2 course becomes a nightmare where teaching is hard if not impossible. At other times, 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. What causes these differences? Why do some classes feel “good” and some “bad”? Why do groups behave as they do? Can we influence group events? How important is it for foreign language teachers anyway?

This paper addresses these questions from the perspective of group dynamics, which, as we will argue, is potentially very fruitful for the language teaching profession. We see the L2 teacher as a juggler rushing to keep the various plates of “skills”, “pace”, “variety”, “activities”, “competencies”, etc. all spinning on their sticks. Yet their job is doomed to failure if the affective ground in which the sticks are planted is not firm. We would suggest that an awareness of classroom dynamics may help teachers establish firm footing, that is, create learning environments where language learning is a rewarding and *therefore* efficient experience.

There are some comments we would like to make at the outset. First, very little in this paper may be completely new for an experienced teacher, since good teachers are intuitively aware of the importance of group-building. However, we believe that by presenting a unified framework and set of terminology/metaphors, as well as by bringing the main issues together, we might provide a useful tool to facilitate the understanding of various group events, and such a summary may also serve as a useful “reminder” for even the seasoned language teacher.

Second, even though group-related issues have not been analysed widely in the L2 literature by applying a group dynamical framework, there has been one notable exception to this, the increasing amount of discussion about *cooperative learning*. This area of educational theory involves a group dynamics-based approach that has been developed by social and educational psychologists. Because of limitations of length, this paper will not go beyond introducing the main principles of cooperative language learning. The reader is referred to two edited volumes on the topic, by Kessler (1992) and Holt (1993), a forthcoming special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (Nyikos and Oxford, in press 1997), and a recent account of the psychological processes underlying cooperative learning by Dörnyei (in press 1997).

Third, when discussing “group dynamics”, we follow the use of the term established in social psychology and we include the whole language class under “group”. Therefore, “group dynamics” in this paper does *not* only concern small-group work *within* the class but rather the whole of classroom dynamics.

Finally, because groups are very complex social entities, we cannot provide an overview of every aspect within this paper (for a comprehensive treatment, see Ehrman and Dörnyei, in press); two notable gaps are the lack of discussion of *group composition* (particularly *gender* as an important factor affecting group life) and *ability grouping* or *streaming* in education. Furthermore, since our approach is primarily psychological, we are not going to analyse how group interaction inherent to various class formations promotes L2 acquisition. For this, the reader is referred to the summaries by McGroarty (1993) and Long and Porter (1985), which describe how the increased amount and variety of target language output and input in group work facilitate L2 development.

In the following, first we provide an overview of the aspects of group dynamics that we consider most relevant to L2 teaching. Then, based on the theoretical insights and our own teaching experience, we make practical suggestions for teachers on how to exploit the principles of group dynamics in their classrooms.

### WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT GROUPS?

Why does the L2 teacher in particular need to be concerned with group-related matters? After all, *we* learned, didn't we? *Our* teachers weren't very preoccupied by group dynamics, were they? We've got *enough* to worry about balancing skills and competencies, pace and variety, keeping up with the latest descriptions of language and communication and

“translating” them into pedagogical realities, and so on, haven’t we? So what’s so special about groups? Here are some answers.

- A group is a “resource pool that is greater in any given area than the resources possessed by any single member” (Douglas, 1983: p. 189). We believe that a class has vast resources which could and should be used, that is, exploited for teaching and learning purposes.
- Groups can be an instrument of behavioural or attitudinal change (Forsyth, 1990). Groups can have a very powerful effect on the members: they serve as reference groups that provide guidelines and standards for evaluating ourselves and, consequently, for adjusting our attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. This is acknowledged when we say, for example, that someone “got into bad/good company”, and the power of group processes is also exploited extensively in psychotherapy.
- Groups can be a substantial source of motivation to learn the L2. It has been recognized increasingly recently that group-based motives form a great proportion of the complex of L2 motivation; that is, the way learners feel in their L2 classes will influence their learning effort considerably (cf. Clément *et al.*, 1994; Dörnyei, 1994).
- Groups can serve as an instrument of support and maintenance (Douglas, 1983). Language learning is a difficult, lifelong endeavour, and groups can provide the stamina and help needed at low points.
- Finally, groups can directly facilitate L2 learning. This influence is due to group processes being greatly responsible for (1) the quantity and quality of interaction between members (cf. Bar-Tal and Bar-Tal, 1986; Levine and Moreland, 1990); (2) cooperation between students and the extent of individual involvement (cf. Johnson and Johnson, 1991); (3) student behaviour, order and discipline in the classroom (cf. Doyle, 1986); (4) students’ relationships with their peers and the teacher (cf. Luft, 1984); and finally, (5) student and teacher confidence and satisfaction.

This preliminary list indicates that we see group-related issues as being very much at the heart of the affective dimension of the L2 learning process. We are in absolute agreement with Stevick’s (Stevick, 1980) claim: “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). A group-centred approach looks at what goes on “between people” and, to a certain extent, how that affects what goes on “inside” them. The time and effort invested in establishing a firm “affective group ground” will, we believe, result in a rewarding (interpersonally, linguistically, pedagogically, and developmentally) experience for teacher and students alike. With some exaggeration we might say that “if you have a good group, you can’t go too far wrong—the group won’t let you, as it is the group as a whole which assumes responsibility—whereas not even the most elaborate teaching methodology will be successful with a bad group/class”.

### WHAT IS “GROUP DYNAMICS”?

*Group dynamics* concerns the scientific analysis of the behaviour of small groups. It is a relatively young discipline with its roots in the 1940s but with its actual development taking off in the 1950s and 1960s. It is not a well-formed and highly integrated field but

rather an approach within many different branches of the social sciences. It overlaps disciplines such as social, industrial, organizational and clinical psychology, psychiatry, sociology and social work, since all these fields involve groups of various kinds as focal points around which human relationships are organized.

There are two simple but crucial facts about groups that have led to the formation of group dynamics: (1) a group has a “life of its own”, that is, individuals in groups behave differently than they would outside the group; and (2) even the most different kinds of groups appear to share some fundamental common features, making it possible to study *the group* in general. Following from these two recognitions, group dynamics has been addressing a very broad range of issues concerning group life and group characteristics, and has introduced specific research methods and research terminology. In order to find an explanation for why some of our L2 classes feel “bad” and others “good”, and also to get ideas on how to make our learners into cohesive groups and keep them that way, we need to introduce concepts such as the *group structure* and *group composition, norms, roles* and *interaction patterns, group cohesion* and *climate, group formation* and *development*, etc., which are indeed key issues of group dynamics.

Our discussion will be centred around five main areas: (1) group formation, (2) group development, (3) group characteristics, (4) the physical environment, and (5) the role of the teacher as the group leader.

## GROUP FORMATION

As a starting point, we must realize that the process of group formation is far from easy for the would-be members. On the first occasions participants meet, an element of tension is present in the interaction: people typically experience unpleasant feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and a lack of confidence (McCollom, 1990b). They must deal with people they hardly know. They are uncertain about what membership in the group will involve, and whether they will be able to cope with the tasks. They observe each other and the leader suspiciously, trying to find their place in the new hierarchy. They are typically on guard, carefully monitoring their behaviour to avoid any embarrassing lapses of social poise.

The first few classes spent together, then, are of vital importance to the future functioning of the group. Development proceeds rapidly and much structuring and organization occur in this period. Within a short time, the group establishes a social structure that will prevail for a long time. There are two aspects of this group formation process which are particularly relevant for L2 teachers: *intermember relations* and *group norms*. We will also discuss two special kinds of activity, *ice-breakers* and *warmers*, whose explicit purpose is to enhance group formation and re-formation respectively.

### *Intermember relations*

When discussing intermember relations, we must distinguish between initial *attraction* towards and *acceptance* of others. According to Shaw (1981), initial interpersonal attraction is a function of physical attractiveness, perceived ability of the other person, and perceived similarity in attitudes, personality, and economic status. The term “acceptance”

was introduced by humanistic psychology; it refers to a feeling towards another individual which is non-evaluative in nature, has nothing to do with likes and dislikes, but involves rather an “unconditional positive regard” towards the individual as a complex human being with all their values and imperfections (cf. Rogers, 1983). 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.

A key concept of group dynamics is the understanding that group development can result in strong cohesion based on intermember acceptance *regardless* of the initial intermember attractions. This implies that even negative initial feelings may turn into understanding and affection during the course of development of the group, and that “one may like group members at the same time as one dislikes them as individual persons” (Turner, 1984: p. 525).

There are several factors that may enhance intermember relations and acceptance. By far the most crucial and general one is *learning about each other* as much as possible, which includes 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.

In addition to getting to know each other, there are more concrete factors that can enhance affiliation. Shaw (1981) mentions *proximity* (the physical distance, e.g. sitting next to each other), *contact* (situations where individuals can meet and communicate, e.g. outings and other extracurricular activities, as well as “in class” opportunities), and *interaction* (situations in which the behaviour of each person influences the others’, e.g. small-group work).

Turner (1984) lists three further factors that may engender favourable attitudes to group members: *shared threat* (e.g. the feeling of fellowship before a difficult exam—equally threatening for the teacher as it is the group’s work, in some sense, that will be evaluated), *intergroup competition* (e.g. within-class competitions, e.g. the school football/chess or other tournament in which competition is by class group), and *cooperation* between members for common goals (e.g. to accomplish group tasks). In our own experience we have found that *joint hardship* (e.g. carrying out some tough physical task together), also brings the group together; this may be an instance of what McDonough (1981) calls *successful completion of whole-group tasks*, which has also been identified as an important factor in developing relations.

#### *Group norms*

*Group norms* are rules or standards that describe behaviour that is essential for the efficient functioning of the group. Such standards may evolve as part of the group’s organic development, but in educational contexts *institutional norms* which are imposed from without or mandated by the leader are also very common (e.g. pupils have to stand up when answering a question, or preparing homework is compulsory). It is important to realize that institutional norms do not become real group norms unless they are accepted as right or proper by the majority of the members; ideally, members should internalize a norm so that it becomes a part of the group’s total value system as a self-evident

precondition of group functioning (cf. Forsyth, 1990; Levine and Moreland, 1990). Therefore, it might be useful to include an explicit norm-building procedure early in the group's life by formulating potential norms, justifying their purpose, having them discussed by the group, and finally agreeing on a mutually accepted set of "class rules".

The advantage of well-internalized norms will be that when someone violates them, the group is likely to be able to cope with such deviations. This may happen through a range of group behaviours—from showing active support for the teacher's efforts to have the norms observed, to expressing indirectly disagreement with and dislike for deviant members, and even to openly criticizing them and putting them in "social quarantine". We should not underevaluate the power of the group: it may bring significant pressures to bear and it can sanction—directly or indirectly—those who fail to conform to what is considered acceptable.

It must be emphasized that learners are very sensitive to the teacher's attitude towards the group norms. In a way the teacher, in his/her position of being the group leader, embodies "group conscience". If the members feel that the teacher does not pay enough attention to having the established norms observed or to observing them themselves, they are quick to take the message that you did not mean what you said, and consequently tend to ignore these norms.

#### *Ice-breakers and warmers*

In the late 1970s, a special category of classroom activity, *ice-breakers*, was introduced in L2 teachers' resource books, designed to be used in the first couple of meetings of a newly formed group. The purpose of these exercises is to set members at ease, to get them to memorize each others' names, and to learn about each other both at a conscious and an unconscious level: they should see the others moving, hear their voices, talk to them, and establish a personal relationship with everybody during the very first classes. With appropriate ice-breakers, students and teacher may feel at home in class after the first few occasions, and treat each other as old acquaintances who have shared common experiences.

Initial breaking of the ice, though, may not be enough. Until the climate warms sufficiently, ice has a habit of re-forming unless constantly moved about. In most learner groups, members will have spent intervening time belonging to, and conforming to norms of, many other groups (families, peers, other classes, etc.). For this reason most groups need a period of readjustment each time they come together, a time to re-form, to reestablish relationships, and implicitly be reminded of goals and norms; at the same time learners can also "switch" from the mother tongue into thinking in and articulating in the L2. These, for us, are the main and invaluable functions of a category of activity now appearing in resource books known as *warmers*, designed to be used at the beginning of every lesson.

## GROUP DEVELOPMENT

The development of a group is a continuous process; that is, after forming an initial group structure (norms and intermember relations), the group enters into a continuous process of change which carries on until the group ceases to exist. In fact, as Hadfield (1992) states,

Forming a group is relatively easy: the initial stage of group life is usually harmonious as students get to know each other and begin to work together. Maintaining a cohesive group over a term or a year is far more difficult (p. 45).

A great body of research suggests that groups move through similar stages during the course of development even in very diverse contexts (cf. McCollom, 1990a; Wheelan and McKeage, 1993). The most famous sequence was offered by Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977), who suggested that there are five developmental stages common to different group settings: *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning*.

In the *forming* stage, as has been discussed above, the group forms and members become oriented towards each other. Attraction bonds develop in tentative interactions that can be characterized by polite discourse and silence; members tend to show each other their public self, avoiding revealing anything of the private self.

The second phase, *storming*, is characterized by conflicts: members express their individuality by becoming hostile towards one another, the leader and the task. Disagreement and competition are typical at this stage; ideas are criticized and speakers are interrupted. Goals too are often renegotiated as previously unstated personal agendas begin to surface. These early struggles, however, are not necessarily detrimental to development; many researchers believe that they are prerequisites for subsequent increases in cohesion and cooperation (Wheelan and McKeage, 1993).

It is at the storming stage that tentative “group-builder” teachers may panic, believe everything was a mistake, blame themselves for their “leniency”, feel angry and resentful towards the students for not understanding the wonderful opportunity they were being offered, and resort to traditional authoritarian methods and procedures to “get order”. The forewarned teacher will realize this is a normal stage, welcome it as a sign of group development (much as L2 teachers welcome creative developmental language errors), gird up their loins, and mediate and negotiate the group through the storm.

In the next stage, *norming*, the group becomes a cohesive entity as members establish and accept norms to regulate behaviour. Harmony is created along with a kind of “we-feeling” and trust, and there is increasing supportiveness.

The fourth stage, *performing*, is the work phase characterized by decreased emotionality and an increase in cooperation and task orientation: the group has reached a maturity, which enables it to perform as a unit in order to achieve desired goals.

Groups with a fixed ending point undergo a fifth phase, *adjourning* or “*mourning*”, associated with a feeling of emptiness and loss. This feeling, if it is perceived as negative, can have detrimental effects on future L2 learning experiences, if only as a vague “I’m not going to get close to this lot because it hurts when I go” sort of feeling. We are therefore in agreement with Hadfield (1992) that “it is important to give students some sense of continuity after the abrupt end of the course that may have been a major part of their lives for some three months, or even longer” (p. 163). Group endings, then, need to be managed as deftly as their beginnings.

Although there is a considerable consensus that groups generally experience the above stages of development, we must also realize that the issues that surface in each phase are never completely resolved and thus the stages may recur. The most significant recurring issue is the emotional progression of the group with phases of *emotionality* and *task activity* alternating in group life. Shambough (1978) postulated that group development was characterized by the fluctuating feelings of *closeness* and *separateness* of the members. During periods of *closeness* and *solidarity*, the general emotion underlying group interaction is the desire for intimacy and acceptance, and the group leader is seen as benevolent. At the same time, cooperative task effort increases and learning is rapid. During phases of *emotional distance*, the underlying emotional issues are hostile, competitive impulses, and the leader is perceived as exploitative and manipulative. During the course of the group's development, however, the group structure becomes more solid and members take on more and more responsibility for organizing their work. This stabilizes task effort in the long run: the intensity of the emotional fluctuation decreases, affective energies tend to be channelled into the tasks, and work output rises.

## GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

The previous two sections focused on the dynamic *progress* of group development. Another important aspect of group dynamics is the description and analysis of central *features* of groups and how these affect group life. Group characteristics include a number of variables, but from our point of view the most important features are related to *group structure*.

The *structure* of a group is the pattern of relationships that emerges among its members; key concepts involve the *norm* and *status system*, *group roles*, *group cohesion*, and *classroom goal structures* (Levine and Moreland, 1990). Of these, group norms have been already discussed in the section on group formation, and the most important group role, the leader's role, will be covered in the last section of this paper.

### *Status system*

Each member occupies a certain *position* in the group; the value, the importance, and the prestige associated with a member's position is referred to as the person's *status* within the group. The relative statuses of group members influence the amount and quality of communication they initiate or receive from others: in general, more communication is both initiated and received by high status than by low status people, and the content of such messages tends to be more positive than messages directed downwards in the status hierarchy. Higher status members are also more likely to criticize, command, or interrupt others. A person's status can also affect how he/she is evaluated by others; Levine and Moreland (1990) point out that higher status members are often evaluated more positively than people with lower status.

In education there seem to exist two fairly independent status hierarchies, one associated with grades and competence, the other associated with "social skills, physical prowess, ability to defy authority and other emotional capacities that have little direct relationship to academic learning" (Luft, 1984: p. 181). To understand this duality we should consider



that status in general is “distributed among group members on the basis of shared expectations about how much each person will contribute to the achievement of those goals” (Moreland and Levine, 1992: p. 246). In certain tasks and group events social skills, creativity, and organizing ability may be seen as the basis of task efficiency—and, therefore, of status—whereas in some other tasks success largely depends on the level of L2 proficiency, and therefore good students will be assigned a higher status.

### *Group cohesion*

Group cohesion can be defined as “the strength of the relationship linking the members to one another and to the group itself” (Forsyth, 1990: p. 10); that is, cohesion corresponds to the extent to which individuals feel a strong identification with their group. It is taken to be an index of the level of group development, and is directly related to within-group cooperation and to both the quality and quantity of group interaction (Shaw, 1981; Greene, 1989).

Evans and Dion (1991) provided a meta-analysis of studies addressing the relationship between group cohesion and group performance, in which they found a significant positive relationship between the two variables, indicating that cohesive groups, on average, tend to be more productive than non-cohesive groups. This may be due to the fact that in a cohesive group, members want to participate more in the group’s activities, want to advance the group’s objectives, and goal-oriented norms have a stronger influence on the individual. Furthermore, Clément *et al.* (1994) found that group cohesion contributes significantly to the learners’ L2 motivation. It is also assumed to have a positive effect on classroom interaction, which is central from a communicative language teaching perspective. Levine and Moreland (1990) point out that members of a cohesive group are more likely than others to participate actively in conversations, engage in self-disclosure or collaborative narration.

How can cohesion be achieved? A very important factor is simply the *amount of time spent together* and the *shared group history*. Second, *positive intermember relations* foster cohesion, which means that all the factors enhancing intermember relations (discussed earlier) will strengthen group cohesion. Third, as Levine and Moreland (1990) conclude, the more a group is *rewarding* to the members, the more cohesive it tends to be. Rewards may involve the joy of the activities, approval of the goals, success in goal attainment, and personal instrumental benefits. A fourth—important—factor concerns *group legends*. As Hadfield (1992) summarizes:

For a group to be harmonious and cohesive, it must have a definite sense of itself as a group, and the individuals who comprise it must have a sense of belonging to the group as well as a sense of their place within it. Very successful groups seem to build up a kind of group mythology, sometimes giving themselves names and inventing characteristics for themselves (p. 72).

Finally, *leaders* can also enhance group cohesion by the way they live out their role (see later).

### *Classroom goal structures*

*Classroom goal structures* refer to how the students’ contribution toward achieving the goals (in our case, learning the L2) is structured in relation to the others’; the three basic

types are *competitive*, *cooperative* and *individualistic* goal structures. In a competitive structure, students work against each other and only the best ones are rewarded. In a cooperative situation students work in small groups, each member sharing responsibility for the outcome, and group members are equally rewarded. In an individualistic structure students work alone and one's probability of achieving a goal or reward is neither diminished nor enhanced by a capable other. That is, in a competitive situation, goal achievement by one member to some extent hinders the goal achievement of other members, whereas in a cooperative situation, goal achievement by one member facilitates goal achievement by all others (Shaw, 1981).

There is consistent evidence from preschool to graduate school settings that, compared to competitive or individualistic learning experiences, the cooperative goal structure is more powerful in promoting (1) intrinsic motivation, in that it leads to less anxiety, greater task involvement, and a more positive emotional tone, (2) positive attitudes towards the subject area, and (3) a caring, cohesive relationship with peers and with the teacher (Johnson and Johnson, 1991; McGroarty, 1993).

## THE EFFECTS OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT ON THE GROUP

The classroom as a physical environment greatly influences the interaction taking place in it. The shape of the room, the furniture, the size and location of the windows, the arrangement of the desks, the decoration on the walls, and even whether or not there are flowers are all powerful factors to be counted (Loughlin, 1992).

### *Arrangement of the chairs*

The classroom's basic spatial characteristics are established architecturally; the teacher, however, can modify the environment considerably through *arranging the furniture*, especially the desks and chairs. We have mentioned the importance of intermember relationships; these are enhanced if eye contact between members is possible. Some sort of circular arrangement would seem the best to achieve this, and it would also cater for the need to *include*, physically, the teacher-leader in the group. It has, in fact, been found that sitting in a circle fosters greater interpersonal attraction and involvement, but the imposed intimacy can also be associated with feelings of confinement (Patterson *et al.*, 1979).

Even in classrooms where the traditional rows and columns of desks/chairs have been done away with, one would more frequently find semi-circles than full circles, with the teacher sitting in the middle of the open end of a U-shape. This reinforces his/her status because the distinguished place puts him/her into a position where he/she can exercise a greater amount of interpersonal influence simply by being in the centre of the communicative network. To increase the self-organizing ability of the group, it is worth closing the circle whenever there is no particular need to draw special attention to the teacher.

From the point of view of student self-organization, tasks that call for a random positioning of the furniture, such as games and small-group activities, are particularly useful, since with this spacial arrangement the teacher is not present in the primary communication networks. Such small-group activities, role-play performances, mime, drama techniques,

etc. require space and movable furniture—something which is unfortunately too often not available in the L2 classroom (we have managed some of these activities in classrooms with desks bolted to the floor in rows, but it is not easy).

Some teachers actually prefer doing away with desks altogether. A lack of desks creates a feeling of closeness and enhances personal communication; on the other hand, desks can also be seen as the students' "private territories", where they put everything they feel necessary for better achievement. Consequently, at first they tend to feel vulnerable without the safety of their desks, and often resist the idea of getting rid of them.

### *Personalizing the classroom*

It is evident that nice decoration creates a better atmosphere, especially if the students themselves have been involved in designing and preparing it. In suggestopedia, a personalized classroom set-up is, in fact, a central component of the method (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 1986). There are also various small gestures that may contribute to the personalization of the physical environment, for example, bringing in flowers or funny objects (the flower of the group, today's puppet). We have also found soft drinks, snacks, and music before and after class, as well as during some L2 tasks, to be successful in creating a more human, relaxed atmosphere.

In addition to creating a pleasant learning environment, the personalization of the classroom is also related to the *ownership of the classroom*. The classroom space is a complex of well-defined "subterritories", consisting of a number of "private spaces" belonging to the students (their chairs and desks), some "public places" governed by the teacher (e.g. the aisles), and the teacher's own domain in the front of the class, including the blackboard. Personalizing the classroom can be seen as the students exercising increasing control over their environment, and, therefore, we might encourage the group to "take over" control over the board, walls, spatial arrangement of the furniture, etc. This will add to the group's growing maturity and self-organizing ability.

## THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AS GROUP LEADER

"Leadership is a universal aspect of human groups, perhaps because group performance is facilitated by the exercise of organizational, directive and normative functions" (Levine and Moreland, 1990: pp. 612–613). Several issues related to efficient group leadership have been mentioned or implied in earlier sections of this paper. Perhaps the most important of these is the fact that, in many ways, the teacher embodies group conscience; we can say with some exaggeration that the group's disposition and commitment to the group goals and norms will follow that of the teacher. This is, unfortunately, also true when the teacher's commitment is low; as Kellerman (1981) argues,

one of the surest ways of undermining the cohesive structure of groups is for the leader to be absent from the group, either physically or with respect to ongoing interest. Once the group agrees that the leader is not fully supportive of the goals of the group or of its implementation of activities, it... becomes fragmented... It might be proposed that highly cohesive groups are those in which the leader symbolizes group concerns and identity (p. 16).

Seen from the perspective of group dynamics, the traditional authoritarian teacher role is undesirable because it does not allow for the group to structure itself organically, nor for the members to share increasing responsibility, and thus it is an obstacle to group development. Such a role, together with highly structured tasks, on the other hand, does appear to many teachers as safer and more efficient than leaving the students, to a certain extent, to their own devices. That is, as in many cases in education, we have a conflict between short-term and long-term objectives: while a tighter control may result in a smoother immediate course, actively seeking student participation in all facets of their learning programme pays off in the long run (for a more detailed discussion of teacher and learner roles, see Wright, 1987).

What is then the task of the non-authoritarian teacher? We believe that most groups have the potential to become a cohesive unit if there is nothing to distort group development. Therefore, an efficient group leader's task, in our view, is not so much to lead the group but rather to *facilitate* it, that is, to create the right conditions for development—in particular a safe and acceptive climate—and to enable the group to do away with any emerging obstacles.

According to the principles of person-centred psychology and education, there are three main characteristics of an efficient facilitator: *empathic ability*, *acceptance of the members* (unconditional positive regard), and *congruence* (see Rogers, 1983). The notion of *acceptance* has already been discussed under interpersonal relationships. Good teachers are able to develop this disposition about even troublesome students, along the line of "he/she may not be perfect, but he/she is still one of us!" *Empathy* involves the ability to get on the same wavelength as the students and to be sensitive to the group atmosphere—again, see earlier.

Being *congruent* refers to the teacher's ability to live, to be, and to communicate according to his/her true self. It is neither a technique nor an attitude but rather a state of realness and authenticity. The teacher appears as a human being and not as an embodiment of authoritative statuses and ready-made roles. It follows from this that congruence involves the teacher's being open about his or her own limitations. This a difficult point, especially with teachers who do not feel 100% confident in themselves. Non-native teachers of a language, for example, often worry about their imperfect command of the L2. This is understandable, but we should realize, first, that mistakes are not such big things from the learners' point of view. In fact, nothing is more relaxing for the group than the teacher's natural acceptance of the gaps or uncertainties in his/her knowledge—in other words, of the acceptance of his or her own "humanity". Second, the very existence of a "group", as opposed to a "class", requires that the teacher is *not* the possessor of all the knowledge, skills, etc. necessary to reach the group goal, and that other members' resources are genuinely needed.

## PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

In this last section we have collected a set of practical suggestions which may be helpful in facilitating group development. For an excellent collection of classroom activities serving the same purpose, see Hadfield (1992); for remedies to potential group-related problems

that may occur in class, the reader is referred to Tiberius's (Tiberius, 1990) unique trouble-shooting guide.

- *Spend some time consciously on group processes*; it is likely to pay off both in terms of L2 learning efficiency and student/teacher satisfaction.
- *Value every member equally as a contributor to group resources*. Start thinking of students as “group members” rather than “L2 learners”, and try and make every member’s contribution essential to the group purpose (this need not necessarily be a “linguistic” contribution, but rather ideas, topics, procedures, activities, etc.).
- *Use ice-breakers at the beginning of a course*. This should not include only the first one or two lessons; we would suggest spending some time (decreasing with the progress of the course) on breaking the ice during the first 5–10 occasions.
- *Start each lesson with a warmer*. This allows members time to readjust to the particular group they are now with.
- *Make a special effort to integrate new members into the group*. Every time just one member changes, it is, essentially, a new group and the group needs forming again. Otherwise, there is a danger of the group breaking down into cliques. Newcomers may find some established customs unfamiliar or strange; moreover, they do not have any fixed position in the old structure, which may lead them to stick together (“oldies” and “newies”) and “fight for their rights”.
- *Promote classroom interaction* by using techniques, activities, and forms of classroom organization which not only allow but encourage people to interact with one another and thus form a group.
- *Try and personalize the language tasks* by choosing, in preference, activities with a genuine potential for interpersonal awareness-raising to allow members to get to know each other.
- *Try and prevent the emergence of rigid seating patterns*. It is an inherent human feature to assume territorial rights over spacial objects. In L2 classrooms, group members soon develop a marked preference for “their” seats, which may result in a rigid, fossilized pattern of “private spaces”, allowing for only certain individuals to get into close proximity and contributing to the formation of cliques. It is worth moving people round regularly, especially at the beginning of a course.
- *Use pair-work and small-group work as well as “mixer” classroom organizations* to allow contact and interaction between all members.
- *Include small-group “fun” competitions in the classes* to promote intermember relationships. You may want to put students together who would not normally make friends easily.
- *Include role-plays and drama activities in the language classes*. They allow students to experiment with various social roles safely by hiding behind a mask. We have noticed that reserved students often found their “public” styles in such situations, and these social roles prevailed in the rest of the course as well.
- *Include occasional whole-group tasks or projects*. These will enhance whole-group cohesion when they are successfully achieved. Note that we are not advocating traditional, frontal whole-class organization (although this will no doubt be necessary at times), but are talking about activities which generate a satisfying visible product, which conclude in the solving of a puzzle or problem, or where the group can, at the end, congratulate themselves on their creativity, thinking, or perceptive abilities.

- *Participate yourself in the activities* as often as your other tasks allow. This will not only enhance your integration into the group, but what you learn about your students and about their language will also provide you with a rich source of ideas for future lesson planning.
- *Encourage and organize extracurricular activities.* Time spent organizing and participating in group outings (the school interclass chess tournament, the group drama show for the local primary school, etc.) will be compensated by increased cohesion in your group—especially if it was the group that organized the events, and not you alone.
- *Formulate group norms explicitly, and have them discussed and accepted by the learners.* Include a specific “group rules” activity at the beginning of a group’s life, perhaps as a negotiated pyramid discussion. Start by making clear any institutional rules—all groups exist within a wider society and are subject to its rules and norms—and then focus the discussion on how the group goals can best be achieved. Specify also the consequences for violation of any agreed “rule”. It is a good idea to put group rules (and the consequences for violating them) on display, and, as and when necessary, renegotiate them.
- *Observe the established norms consistently and never let any violations go unnoticed.* When the group itself does not draw attention to some violation, and even if there is no penalty involved, indicate by making at least a comment that you were aware of a norm not being kept.
- *Don’t panic when there are conflicts or low points in group life.* These are natural concomitants of group life which every healthy group undergoes.
- *Deal with conflicts sensitively and openly.* One of the best ways to release any kind of tension is to talk about it. This might even be a language exercise: sitting in a circle, everybody could complete a sentence like “I feel awful/depressed because...” In a safe atmosphere this ought to lead to a lively discussion. Whatever the technique, the teacher’s role is not to give advice or offer solutions but rather to be actively present, to listen to everybody carefully, and then to help the group arrive at decisions about what to do constructively. We can have enough trust in the group to assume that it can cope with its problems.
- *Prepare group members for the closing of the group.* The adjourning or closing stage should not be simply about saying goodbye but also giving members some continuity and helping them to prepare for their new phase of learning after the course. This might include agreeing on a reunion, discussing long-term learning objectives, and checking whether anyone needs any support for making the next steps (cf. Kemp and Taylor, 1992).
- *Promote the creation of a group legend* by establishing group rituals, bringing up and building on past group events, creating a semi-official group history, encouraging learners to prepare “group objects” and symbols (flags, coats of arms) and to find or create appropriate group mottos/logos, etc.
- *Use cooperative rather than competitive or individualistic learning tasks.* Possible activities (all in small groups) include, among others, doing role-play performances, problem solving tasks, project work, filling in worksheets, and preparing group reports—that is, activities that require a single “group product”—as well as cooperative/group preparation for tests (for more details, see McGroarty, 1993).

- *Vary the spatial arrangement of the L2 classroom.* The chairs, the tables and the floor space should serve particular work needs. Whenever the task allows for alternative seating arrangements, it is worth changing the space pattern of the classroom to prevent any fossilized formations.
- *Try not to occupy a distinguished spatial position in the classroom* whenever it is not necessary for the task.
- *Encourage learners to personalize the classroom* according to their taste: they might bring in posters and flowers, make special decorating objects, even small pieces of furniture (shelves, cases, etc.); we have been in classrooms whose walls were painted by the students themselves.
- *Share the ownership of the classroom with the group* (within the constraints of the institution, naturally) by including specific reference to the physical environment in the “norm-establishing” negotiations.
- *Take the students’ learning very seriously.* We must never forget that the commitment we demonstrate, the interest we show in the students’ achievement, and the effort we ourselves make will determine the students’ attitudes to L2 learning.
- *Actively encourage student autonomy.* The move from teacher dependence to group dependence is a logical and achievable (in most contexts) step along the path to learner independence—surely the ultimate goal of all educators.
- *Hand over as much as you can of the various leadership roles and functions to the group.* Give students positions and tasks of genuine authority, invite them to design and prepare activities themselves, encourage peer teaching, involve students in record keeping, and let the group make real decisions. In other words, think about which things you do that your students could also do, and then let them do it.
- *Adopt the role of a facilitator* rather than an authority figure, or a “drill sergeant”, and try and develop a warm rapport with the students.
- *Try to be congruent, empathic and accepting.* These basic components of efficient facilitation skills are fairly simple on paper; however, it takes long and conscious effort to adjust one’s teaching style accordingly. As with a lot of things in life, though, “it’s the travelling not the getting there” that is important.

## CONCLUSION

The difficulty in understanding the exact nature of classroom events lies to a large extent in the complexity of the classroom, that is, “the full range of variables present in educational settings” and “the lack of well-defined classroom processes to serve as variables” (Savignon, 1990: p. 213). In an analysis of the dynamics of the language lesson, Prabhu (1992) distinguished between four dimensions: the lesson as (1) a curricular unit and (2) a method in operation (pedagogic dimensions), and the lesson as (3) a social genre and (4) a play of personalities (social and personal dimensions). Group dynamics offers a framework to integrate diverse classroom variables associated with all the four dimensions and to account for situation-specific variance in both learner motivation and achievement. We see it as a potential interface between theoretical concepts and actual classroom reality, or, in the words of Prabhu (1992), between “specialists’ theories” and “teachers’ theories” (p. 24).

Group dynamics is a very “useful” discipline, with many practical instructional implications. Our basic assumption underlying this paper has been that the learner group is a powerful entity whose characteristics have a major impact on the productivity of learning; by understanding these, we can make classroom events less threatening to the teacher, we can develop more efficient methods of classroom management, and we can consciously facilitate the development of creative, well-balanced, and cohesive groups. These groups will have vast resources of their own, which can then be exploited for more intensive and efficient L2 learning; that is, the time and attention spent on facilitating group development will, we believe, pay off in terms of learning outcomes as well.

Having collected all the “good advice” in the suggestions, we are aware that all this may seem a bit overpowering and very complex, seemingly requiring months and months of training. (In fact, compiling this list of “what-to-dos” made us realize how much we are actually not doing!) In reality, however, it is not quite so. All you really need is (1) the conviction that it is worth paying attention to the group (and not only to actual L2 teaching), and (2) to start implementing any of the ideas mentioned. You will, we hope, soon get into the spirit and find, like us, that your efforts to create a group are already fun and rewarding in the short run, and that in the long run the membership of the groups you have created and led is one of the most powerful tools for your own as well as your students’ development.

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