

A student-centred approach to language teaching 1

An integrated classroom group makes language learning more efficient, says Zoltán Dörnyei and Kata Gajdáty. In their first article, they suggest ways of achieving this, through student-centred organisation and teaching.

The concepts of the person-centred approach have appeared in language teaching methodology through the humanistic techniques in general, and more specifically through Community Language Learning (CLL). The two authors of this article, a psycholinguist and a psychotherapist, have been working together with an adult EFL group for almost two years and have tried to find those aspects of the person-centred approach that can successfully be applied to language teaching of all age groups.

Group dynamics

Every group undergoes a unique, long-term process of internal development. The person-centred approach claims that with good conditions this development will result in an organic, self-sufficient cohesion within the group. A creative, well-balanced group has vast resources of its own, which we believe can be exploited for more intensive and efficient language learning.

According to the person-centred principles, the group leader should not be directive but should facilitate the internal 'growth' of the group by providing a safe climate, preventing any rigid patterns, releasing the atmosphere, and by handling the inevitable ups and downs.

While there are no exact recipes on how to achieve this, in this article we will highlight some points which need special attention in the language class.

First steps

1. English first names — getting a special name in the group might be the first step to becoming a group member. It is extremely important that the students like their names, as these will often become a part of their identities.

2. Icebreaking - the members of a new group are always full of anxiety. Short introductions normally do not result in real acceptance of each other. You should find icebreakers (1) where the students can get to know each other on as many different levels as possible. They should see the others moving, hear their voices, talk to them, establish

some personal relationship with everybody during the very first classes.

Detailed planning of these first encounters is of crucial importance. Lively, rapid rotation of icebreakers will also open up shy, withdrawn students.

3. Old members, new members - using icebreakers and warmers is very important after longer holidays or at the beginning of each term even if the group consists of the same old members. Should there be any newcomers, a special effort must be made to integrate them into the old group so as to avoid the formation of cliques.

4. Norms — a language teaching process requires some set structures and rules, for example, doing homework, not being late. It is very difficult for a liberal teacher to decide what to do if this structure is violated. By disciplining he/she will fall back into an authoritative role. The solution might be agreeing on a definite set of indispensable rules at the beginning. If the group consistently feels that you take these group norms seriously there is a very good chance that they will accept them as necessary for the group to function.

Preventing static groups

1. Seating — a group can very easily become static and thus some unwanted fixed patterns might develop. One way

to avoid this is by changing the order of seating regularly. In the first few lessons it is worth moving people round even during an individual lesson.

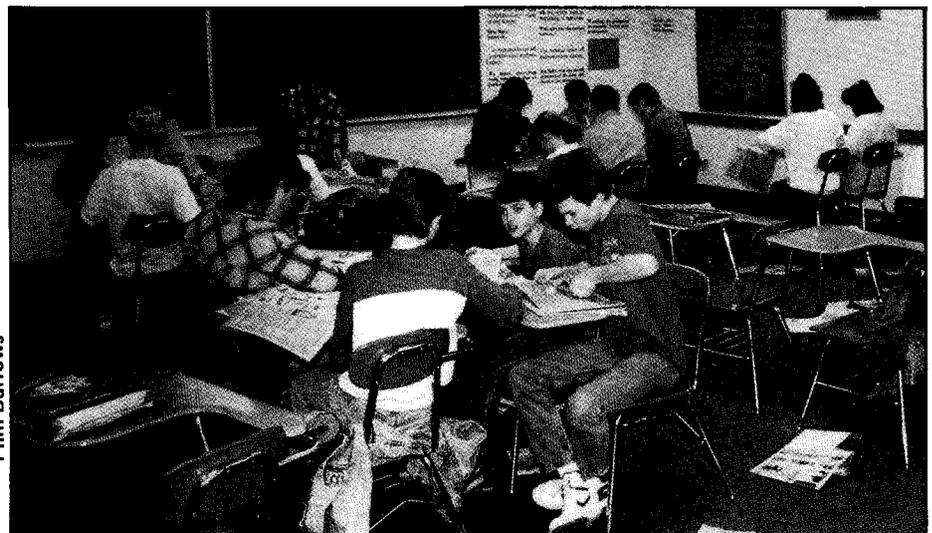
2. The space used by the teacher — teachers tend to stay in specific areas of the classroom. These are partly defined by the location of the equipment, for example, the blackboard, and partly by the teacher's 'sense of space'. Varying the space patterns of the classroom can have a dynamic effect. And it is quite an experience for yourself!

3. **Pair work, group work, movement** — working in pairs and small groups with different partners always has a beneficial effect on keeping the group open and flexible. The same thing is true of activities involving movement. Even mechanical drills can be made rhythmical and varied by doing them in different group formations or by standing up.

4. How to form small groups — we have used four ways depending on the atmosphere and the language task:

- The teacher selects the groups — a safe way to achieve efficient group work. Students, however, soon work out the basis of selection and thus some of them might feel pigeon-holed.
- Drawing lots — students tend to like it as it is adventurous.
- Students choose their own partners — this gives them a free hand in arranging interactions, and they share

Vary positioning of furniture during group work to create a more dynamic class atmosphere



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some responsibility too. In an accepting and caring atmosphere nobody will feel excluded.

d) The group decides democratically which of the above alternatives to choose. In our group their choice varied a lot from session to session.

We have found that in many cases a small group that we had considered problematic turned out to be efficient: withdrawn or slow students performed better when not dominated by the bright ones.

5. Role-plays and sketches — mini-theatre performances greatly improve speaking skills, and by hiding behind a mask students can safely experiment with their own identities. Reserved students often find their individual styles in these situations.

6. Personalising the classroom — one way to achieve this is by rearranging the furniture. We have tried four alternatives:

a) Desks in a semi-circle — slight departure from the traditional authoritarian setting.

b) Random positioning of furniture — for games and group work.

c) Chairs in a semi-circle — by doing away with the safety of the desks closeness and cohesion can be obtained.

d) Chairs in a full circle — the teacher does not have a distinguished place any more and a circle can bring the group together.

Small gestures like bringing in flowers can also personalise the formal classroom while soft drinks and snacks have also been successful in releasing tension. Finally, we always have music before class and in the breaks, and very often during exercises too.

Ups and downs

1. Initial v permanent group level — a general feature of group dynamics is that the initial impetus gradually fades out and gives way to a steadier, permanent functioning level. The first, inspired 'honeymoon' period should be exploited thoroughly to establish the basis of the later work. Without long-term planning this smooth and lively stage will not last long. In our experience, the emerging everyday level is determined by three factors:

a) The mutual acceptance and observance of the introduced norms.

b) The self-reliance of the group — this involves self-organising ability, growing group confidence and shared responsibility, which will result in students working together for a common goal.

c) A crucial factor is the devotion of the teacher to which the group is very sensitive. In this respect, an enthusiastic and motivated beginner is better than an experienced but overburdened teacher.

2. When the group is **down** — do not panic! It inevitably happens once in a while. One of the best ways to release

tension is to talk about it. This might even be a language exercise: sitting in a circle everybody should complete a sentence like *I feel awful/depressed because...* In a safe atmosphere this ought to lead to a lively discussion. Your role is not to give advice or offer solutions but rather to listen to everybody carefully. A well-functioning group can cope with its problems.

3. Success — this is the best motivating factor. At some points of language learning every learner feels that his/her efforts are in vain. In such cases it is worth slowing down the teaching pace and giving the students tasks in which they are proficient.

4. Personal talks — group members sometimes need personal caring. Having a word with them privately might provide the needed impetus to sort out their problems. But when? We always arrive well before our classes to be available. In secondary schools, however, this may not work and some other solution must be found. Personal comments written on their homework or papers also plays an important role.

5. Temporary group passivity — it is very often caused by some outside circumstance, for example, a change in the weather or an extremely tiring day. A powerful attempt to stir up the group might totally drain your energies. Sometimes it is better to relax and accept the situation. You should not push anything too hard but rather offer them alternatives to choose from.

Aspects of teaching

1. Balance — the learners' language confidence is very shaky. Losing their internal balance might completely block their achievement. Therefore, new material should be presented in consumable bits and after some 'heavy stuff' try to counter-balance their 'don't know' feeling with confidence-raising language tasks.

2. **Grammatical rules** — it is worth stressing that a foreign language is not a huge amount of information to be memorised, it is a new dimension of the learner's personality. Native speakers themselves often break grammar book rules.

Over-detailed grammatical explanations very rarely fulfil their purpose. We have always tried to explain only the essence of the rules and then let the students master the details in practice. When a new structure first appeared we gave a brief explanation and added, 'but this is something we'll learn later'. Explicit categorisation should come only after they have become familiar with the new phenomenon.

3. To correct or not to correct — we do not like correcting verbal mistakes too much because it shakes the learner's language confidence. The correction of written homework with

detailed personal comments, as well as the requirement to rewrite every corrected sentence for the next time, have proved to be more useful.

4. Tests — these may serve as an efficient control framework to hold together a loose learning process. If they are not used punitively, then students tend to like them as they can assess what they have achieved; and besides, they find them a good learning tool too. Very often we got them to correct their papers themselves.

5. Lesson-planning — our main concern was to plan the rhythm and process of the lessons. What should be the proportion of different kinds of interaction?; of the structured and unstructured parts?; of directed and free language tasks? An important but often neglected point is to mix static, sitting tasks with activities involving movement.

The teacher's role

1. The teacher as a facilitator — the traditional, authoritative teacher-role does not fit into a group-centred set-up. The facilitator in a student-centred classroom is equal to the group members. Although he/she has a distinguished role as the group leader, the less directly he/she behaves the better facilitator he/she becomes.

2. The teacher as the language-knower - the language teacher need not hide his/her imperfections. Nothing is more relaxing for the group than the teacher's natural acceptance of the gaps and uncertainties in his/her knowledge. Non-native teachers have an advantage in this respect as they are constant learners themselves too.

3. The teacher as a human person — just like everybody else, language teachers are sometimes depressed or worn-out. In an accepting and trustful atmosphere there is no need to pretend the opposite. The teacher can build on the group just as the group builds on him/her in other cases. In fact, any unnatural, insincere behaviour might cause more tension than the teacher's lack of vitality.

In the second part of this article we will focus on Community Language Learning which is the most direct adaptation of a student-centred approach in language teaching.

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Reference

(1) for specific examples see *Icebreakers* by Alison Coulavin (P.E.T. September, 1984).

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Community Language Learning helps improve group relationships while generating real communication. Zoltan Dornyei and Kata Gajdatsy describe how it can be successfully applied in class.

Following on from the first part of our article (March '89) which dealt with the implications of student-centred teaching on group development, Community Language Learning (hereafter CLL) now deserves special attention as this method is entirely based on the person-centred concept of group dynamics. In addition, we have found it an outstanding language teaching technique too.

Apart from being a non-traditional method, it is often said that CLL is time-consuming and difficult to integrate into a formal curriculum. Foreign language syllabuses are so crowded as a rule that teachers are reluctant to experiment with something completely different. On the other hand, CLL is a method where being a non-native teacher is an advantage, as it is almost indispensable for the students and the teacher to share a common language.

A CLL session

We have treated CLL as a supplementary activity. The sessions usually took place once every two weeks. The procedure was as follows:

Stage 1 (20 minutes): Students sit in a closed circle in the middle of which there is a tape recorder. The task is to make a joint recording. The topic is completely up to the group: it can range from a specific subject matter to everyday chat. If someone has something to say he/she can first think it over, can ask for help from the teacher who stays outside the circle and whispers the answer into the student's ear. When the student feels ready to speak he/she pushes the recording button and records the sentence. The teacher does not interfere with the process, avoiding even eye-contact.

We have fixed the length of this stage at 20 minutes, which would give a five-seven minute recorded dialogue. Very often some students do not say a word during this time. This does not mean that they are not involved. They actively listen but are not ready to talk for some reason.

Stage 2 (five-seven minutes): The recorded dialogue is played.



In the first stage of a CLL session students sit in a circle and jointly record a dialogue — the teacher helps only when asked to

Stage 3 (10 minutes): The teacher joins the circle and asks everybody to make some comments on what he/she has noticed or experienced about himself/herself during the recording and re-playing of the dialogue. Students are free to speak in their mother tongue if they wish. In our group the native language at first dominated; later, however, the amount of English increased. This feedback stage plays an important role in releasing tensions. The teacher makes no comments but listens to everybody very carefully and understandingly.

Stage 4 (five-15 minutes): The recording is played again and some incorrect sentences are written on the blackboard. They are discussed and corrected together. At home we type the dialogue correctly.

Follow-up

The general guidelines for CLL normally end at the point of handing out the typed copies to the students. We have felt, however, that additional follow-up exercises are needed.

1. Everybody gets a typed copy on which the names of the speakers are left out. They should be filled in individually or in groups.
2. Students read out their own

sentences as normally as possible.

3. They listen to the recording while following the corrected text.

4. We discuss the corrections — the mistakes have a high diagnostic value.

From this point on the typed text can be exploited during the subsequent classes just like any textbook dialogue. The series of dialogues, in fact, could make up a private coursebook. These texts, however, are highly personal and contain expressions and language forms that the students really needed. New material may come in through the teacher's help and the corrections.

Using CLL dialogues

The following are several methods from *Exploiting textbook dialogues dynamically* (1) as well as some new techniques which have been used successfully with CLL texts,

1. Students work in pairs or small groups. Someone reads out the dialogue in bits, the others repeat or immediately translate what they have heard.

2. Someone translates the utterances, and the others put them back into English.

3. Only the keywords of each utterance are provided, and students re-construct the sentences: *anybody ... like ... skiing* → *Is there anybody who likes skiing?* →

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4. Students vary the original sentences by colouring them with extra words, for example, *you know, to tell the truth*, or by paraphrasing some structures and applying synonyms.

5. They extend the utterances so that the hidden message, the real speech function comes explicitly to the surface: *Mary, are you tired?* → *Mary, you don't look very well. What's the problem? Is there anything wrong?*

6. By picking out some sentences from the text students construct a new dialogue, which is a good exercise if the text is rather long. Of course originally adjacent sentences cannot be used together. You may allow them to change or add a word where necessary.

7. The teacher collects some functional sentences/idioms that have parallels in the text — students must spot these, for example, T: *I had a nice time*, S: (from the text) *I enjoyed myself*.

8. Sitting in a circle each student says a word (or a sentence or an idiom) he/she particularly liked in the text. Go round quickly several times.

9. The homework was usually to pick out and paraphrase 15 sentences.

We have spent five–15 minutes with the typed texts in every class. Students wrote a test on each dialogue: normally a translation into English based on the

original sentences of the dialogue. We accepted every appropriate solution.

Educational value

CLL proved to be an excellent language exercise. The recording situation is closer to real life than most classroom activities: real communication takes place with real tension. At first the students had some reservations, but after about the third session they realised the learning potential of the method and looked forward to future sessions.

On the surface, the recorded and typed dialogues are independent of the official curriculum. We found, however, that the new material always turned up in the texts sooner or later. The structures and lexis of the CLL texts were fixed in the students' memories and they could apply them in other situations too. Thus CLL efficiently develops speaking skills and active vocabulary. Because of correction and grammatical discussion the method also improves language accuracy.

Group value

From the point of view of group dynamics CLL is equally useful. It is a real community activity, and the record-

ed interactions enable the group to realise and sort out some existing tensions. We have got to know each other from a new angle.

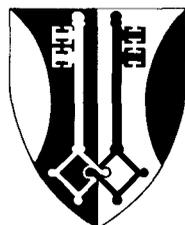
It is important to stress that CLL is a safe technique. The tensions generated by the recording sessions reflect the tension of real life situations and provide the student with a stepping-stone out of the over-protective environment of the language classroom. This tension, however, is released during the feedback stage, so no bad memories are left behind. The texts can be further exploited in various ways which will always be lively since the starting point is personal language material.

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Reference

- (1) *Exploiting textbook dialogues dynamically* by Zoltán Dörnyei (P.E.T. June, 1986).

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