10 The role of group dynamics in foreign language learning and teaching[1]

Zoltán Dornyei and Angi Malderez

> [In a language course] success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom.
>
> (Stevick 1980:4)

In our quest to discover the nature of effective teaching and learning, we have come to agree more and more with Earl Stevick's statement (quoted above) concerning success in language learning. Consideration of the 'between people' factors led us to ask the following questions:

- What does, in fact, go on between people in a classroom?
- How does this affect the learning process?
- Will an understanding of the 'between people' factors provide clues to why some of our groups are easy and comfortable to work with and others more difficult?
- What can we, as teachers, do to influence positively what goes on between people in a classroom?

In this chapter we attempt to address these questions from the perspective of group dynamics, which, as we will argue, is potentially very fruitful for the language teaching profession. The basic assumption underlying the chapter is that group processes are a fundamental factor in most learning contexts and can make all the difference when it comes to successful learning experiences and outcomes. As teachers, we have all experienced occasions when something 'went wrong' with the class and the L2 course became a nightmare where teaching was hard, if not impossible. As Tiberius (1990:v) states in the introduction of his unique trouble-shooting guide to small group teaching, 'Unless teachers are singularly fortunate or exceptionally oblivious, they become aware of problems in their teaching from time to time. For example, a class is

---

[1] Work by the first author and Madeline Ehrman on a book on group dynamics (Ehrman and Dornyei 1998) has generated many ideas which have been influential in this chapter as well.

bored, hostile, uncomprehending, or simply not learning'. On the other hand, the Lz classroom can also 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 is happening in these classes?

Our past experience and a consensus in the research literature indicate that group events are greatly responsible for:

- the participants' attitudes toward and affective perception of the learning process (Ehrman and Dornyei 1988);
- the quantity and quality of interaction between group members (Levine and Moreland 1990);
- the extent of co-operation between students and the degree of individual involvement (Johnson and Johnson 1995);
- the order and discipline in the classroom (Jones and Jones 1995);
- students' relationships with their peers and the teacher (Ehrman and Dornyei 1998);
- a significant proportion of the student's motivation to learn the Lz (Dornyei in press);
- student and teacher confidence and satisfaction (Dornyei and Malderez 1997).

Thus, we see group-related issues as being very much at the heart of the affective dimension of the Lz learning process. Regardless of whether or not the group leader - that is, the language teacher - pays attention to them, learning is strongly influenced by such group properties as structure, composition, cohesiveness, climate, norms, roles and interaction patterns, to name a few. Knowledge of these will allow the teacher to interpret group events, to intervene at the right time and with a clear purpose, and thereby consciously facilitate the emergence of harmonic and organic learning groups. As Jones and Jones (1995:101) point out:

> it is important to realize that groups, like individuals, have needs that must be met before the group can function effectively. If the classroom group is to function in a supportive, goal-directive manner, teachers must initially set aside time for activities that enable students to know each other, develop a feeling of being included, and create diverse friendship patterns. Only after these feelings have been developed can a group of students proceed to respond optimally to the learning goals of the classroom.

In sum, a group-centred approach looks at what goes on 'between people' and, to a certain extent, how that affects what goes on 'inside' them. We see the Lz teacher as a juggler rushing to keep the various

plates of 'skills', 'pace', 'variety', 'activities', 'competencies', etc. all spinning on their sticks. Yet this 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; the time and effort invested in establishing a solid 'affective group ground' will pay off in the long run as it will lead to an experience that is rewarding interpersonally, linguistically, pedagogically and developmentally for teacher and students alike.

In this chapter after providing a brief overview of the discipline, our main focus will be on the *development* of groups. We will also touch upon the effects of various *leadership styles.* (For overviews of other significant related topics, see the works listed in the Suggestions for further reading on page 169.)

What is 'group dynamics'?

Although groups vary in size, purpose, composition, character, etc., there are two simple but basic facts that have led to the formation of a discipline within the social sciences - *group dynamics* - to study them:

1. A group has a 'life of its own', that is, individuals in groups behave differently than they would do outside the group.
z. Even the most different kinds of groups appear to share some fundamental common features, making it possible to study *the group* in general.

The systematic study of the dynamics of groups was initiated in the United States by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin and his associates in the 1940s, and group issues have been studied since then within many different branches of the social sciences - social, industrial, organizational and clinical psychology, psychiatry, sociology and social work - that is, in fields which involve groups of various kinds as focal points around which human relationships are organized. Interestingly, educational researchers and practitioners have been somewhat slow in realizing the relevance of group dynamics to teaching, even though most institutional instruction takes place within relatively small groups. This is partly due to the different research traditions: educationalists interested in the psychology of classroom events have tended to focus on a more static concept, describing the social psychological climate of the learning context, the *classroom environment* (cf. Fraser 1994; Fraser and Walberg 1991), which subsumes a number of variables also discussed in group dynamics-based approaches (e.g. cohesiveness, satisfaction, leadership styles, classroom organization).

A second reason for underutilizing the knowledge offered by group dynamics is that apart from certain special school types (e.g. private language schools where a student goes to only one class), class group boundaries lack the firmness necessary for autonomous group functioning and development, and group composition is often somewhat unstable (Ehrman and Dornyei 1998). In most schools in the world, class group membership fluctuates continuously: the group is regularly split up into smaller independent units based on gender, competence or interest. Even with fairly steady class groups, at least one key member, the teacher, usually changes regularly, according to the subject matter.

In spite of the above, group theory has an important contribution to make to understanding what goes on in classrooms. Certain aspects of the classroom, such as the relationship patterns among students or the dynamic developmental progress of class groups, simply cannot be understood fully without a focus on classroom group processes. In the last two decades the growing popularity of *co-operative learning* (see Crandall, this volume; Dornyei, in press) has also highlighted the relevance of group theory to education, since this instructional approach is entirely based on the understanding and positive exploitation of classroom dynamics.

The development of class groups

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). As Ehrman and Dornyei (1998) contend:

> The development of groups ... has similarities from one group to the next that make it possible to describe a group's evolution in terms of phases, each of which has common patterns and themes. This generalizable change over time within groups has great practical implications for choosing appropriate interventions, whether by a therapist or by a teacher. It is therefore no wonder that group development is one of the most extensively studied issues in group research.

Ehrman and Dornyei (1998) suggest that in educational contexts it is useful to distinguish four primary developmental stages: *group formation, transition, performing* and *dissolution.*

Group formation

Let us start our exploration of classroom dynamics at the very beginning: the first few lessons of a newly formed group. As a starting point, we must realize that the process of group formation is far from easy for the would-be members. In 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 occurs in this period. Fairly quickly, the group establishes a social structure that will prevail for a long time. Aspects of this group formation process which are particularly relevant for L2 teachers are the promotion of the development of *intermember relations* and *group norms* and the clarification of *group goals.*

Intermember relations

When discussing peer 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. This type of relationship is very different from 'acceptance' - a term introduced by humanistic psychology, referring to a non-evaluative feeling that has nothing to do with likes and dislikes, but involves rather an 'unconditional positive regard' towards other individuals as complex human beings with all their values and imperfections. It is, in a way, the 'prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities' (Rogers 1983:124). It could be compared to how we may feel toward a relative, for example an aunt or an uncle, whom we know well and who has his or her shortcomings but who is one of us.

A key concept in group dynamics is the understanding that group development can result in strong cohesiveness 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 the group's development, and that

'one may like group members at the same time as one dislikes them as individual persons' (Turner 1984:525).

How can we, teachers, promote acceptance in our classes? 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 is greatly furthered by 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 some more concrete factors that can also enhance affiliation (cf. Dornyei and Malderez 1997; Ehrman and Dornyei 1998; Hadfield 1992; Johnson and Johnson 1995; Levine and Moreland 1990; Shaw 1981; Turner 1984):

- *Proximity,* that is, physical distance (e.g. sitting next to each other), which is a necessary condition for the formation of relationships.
- *Contact,* referring to situations where individuals can meet and communicate (e.g. outings and other extracurricular activities, as well as 'in class' opportunities).
- *Interaction,* referring to situations in which the behaviour of each person influences the others' (e.g. small group activities, project work).
- *Co-operation* between members for common goals (e.g. to accomplish group tasks). As Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1995:19) summarize, 'Striving for mutual benefit results in an emotional bonding with collaborators liking each other, wanting to help each other succeed, and being committed to each other's well-being'.
- *Successful completion of whole group tasks* and a sense of group achievement.
- *Intergroup competition* (e.g. games in which groups compete), which has been found to bring together members of the small groups.
- *Joint hardship* that group members have experienced (e.g. carrying out a difficult physical task together), which is a special case of group achievement.
- *Common threat,* which can involve, for example, the feeling of fellowship before a difficult exam.

Group norms

Teachers and students alike would agree that there need to be certain 'rules of conduct' in the classroom to make joint learning possible. Some of these behavioural standards, or *group norms,* are constructed

by the learners themselves, often following influential peers, but in educational settings *institutional norms* which are imposed from without or mandated by the leader are also very common (e.g. special dressing and behavioural codes). The developing norm system has an immense significance: norms regulate every detail of classroom life, from the volume of speech to the extent of cooperation. Most importantly from an educational perspective, group norms regarding learning effort, efficiency and quality will considerably enhance or decrease the individual learners' academic achievement and work morale.

It is important to realize that institutional rules and regulations 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 is 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 criticizing them openly and putting them in 'social quarantine'. We should not underestimate 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. Cohen (1994a) summarizes the significance of internalized norms well:

> Much of the work that teachers usually do is taken care of by the students themselves; the group makes sure that everyone understands what to do; the group helps to keep everyone on task; group members assist one another. Instead of the teacher having to control everyone's behaviour, the students take charge of themselves and others. (p. 60)

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

Group goals

The extent to which the group is attuned to pursuing its goal (in our case, Lz learning) is referred to as *goal-orientedness.* As Hadfield (1992:134) emphasizes, 'It is fundamental to the successful working of a group to have a sense of direction and a common purpose. Defining and agreeing on aims is one of the hardest tasks that the group has to undertake together'.

Whereas in the 'real world' groups are often self-formed for a voluntarily chosen purpose, in school contexts the overwhelming majority of classes are formed for a purpose decided by outsiders - policy and curriculum-makers. Thus the 'official group goal' (mastering the course content) may well not be the only group goal and in extreme cases may not be a group goal at all; furthermore, members may not show the same degree of commitment to the group goal. Indeed, we have found that when participants of a new course shared openly their *own* personal goals, this has usually revealed considerable differences that lead to a negotiation process; this process, in itself, is a valuable form of self-disclosure that enhances intermember relations, and the successful completion of a set of 'group goals' is a good example of 'whole-group' achievement.

We find it particularly important, therefore, that the group agree on its goal by taking into account *individual goals* (which may range from having fun to passing the exam or to getting the minimum grade level required for survival) and *institutional constraints* ('you're here to learn the Lz, this is the syllabus for this year!'), as well as the *success criteria.* Traditionally, these latter have been to do with exams and marks, but other communicative criteria can often be a better incentive, e.g. to be able to understand most of the word of the songs of a pop group, or other specific communicative objectives.

Further development of the group: transition, performing and dissolution

The development of a group is a continuous process; that is, after the ice has been broken and an initial group structure has been formed, the group enters into an ongoing process of change which carries on until the group ceases to exist. In fact, as Hadfield (1992:45) 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'.

The initial group formation phase is usually followed by a rugged transition period for the group to work through. As Schmuck and Schmuck (1988:42) state, 'It appears inevitable in classrooms that students will test their degree of influence with the teacher as well as with other students'. Indeed, at this stage of group development, differences and conflicts become common, stemming from disagreement and competition among members and between the group and the leader. These early struggles, however, are not necessarily detrimental to development; the turbulent processes usually elicit counter-processes involving more negotiation regarding goals, roles, rules and norms. Gradually a new awareness of standards and shared values emerges, and a finalized system of group norms is adopted with the explicit goal to eliminate tensions and increase productivity.

Stage 3, *performing,* involves the balanced, cohesive group in action, doing what it has been set up for. This is the work-phase, characterized by decreased emotionality and an increase in co-operation and task orientation: the group has reached a maturity, which enables it to perform as a unit in order to achieve desired goals. That is, the performing phase represents the point at which 'the group can mobilize the energy stored in its cohesiveness for productivity and goal achievement' (Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998). It should be emphasized that even during this stage group functioning is somewhat uneven: phases of *emotional closeness* (co-operation, intimacy) and *distance* (competitive impulses, status differentiation) recur in alternation. However, due to the group's increasing self-organization, the intensity of these phenomena decreases and affective energies are increasingly channelled into the tasks, as a result of which work output rises (Shambough 1978).

The last stage of a group's life is *dissolution,* which is an emotionally loaded period for most educational groups, demonstrated by the great number of reunion events often planned at the break-up of a group. This is the time to say goodbye and to process the feeling of loss, to summarize and evaluate what the group has achieved, pulling together loose ends, and to conclude any unfinished business. Learners may want to find ways of keeping in touch with each other, and they will also need guidelines and advice about how to maintain what they have learnt or how to carry on improving their Lz competence. Group endings, then, need to be managed as deftly as their beginnings.

Group cohesiveness

Group cohesiveness, the principal feature of a fully matured group, can be defined as 'the strength of the relationship linking the members to

one another and to the group itself (Forsyth 1990:10); that is, cohesiveness corresponds to the extent to which individuals feel a strong identification with their group. In a review of the literature, Mullen and Copper (1994) list three primary constituent components of cohesiveness: *interpersonal attraction, commitment to task* and *group pride.* Interpersonal attraction refers to the members' desire to belong to the group because they like their peers. Task commitment concerns the members' positive appraisal of the group's task-related goals in terms of their importance and relevance, that is, 'group feeling' is created by the binding force of the group's purpose. Group pride involves a cohesive force stemming from the attraction of membership due to the prestige of belonging to the group.

Cohesiveness has been seen as a prerequisite and predictor of increased *group productivity* (Evans and Dion 1991; Gully, Devine and Whitney 1995; Mullen and Copper 1994). This may be due to the fact that in a cohesive group there is an increased obligation to the group, members feel a moral responsibility to contribute to group success, and the group's goal-oriented norms have a strong influence on the individual. In cohesive groups, therefore, the likelihood of 'social loafing' and 'free-riding' (i.e. doing very little actual work while still reaping the benefits of the team's performance) decreases. Furthermore, Clement, Dornyei and Noels (1994) also found that perceived group cohesiveness contributes significantly to the learners' L_2 motivation, which again enhances learning success.

How can cohesiveness be achieved? The following factors have been found effective in promoting the development of a cohesive group (cf. Ehrman and Dornyei 1998; Forsyth 1990; Hadfield 1992; Levine and Moreland, 1990):

- *Positive intermember relations;* this means that all the factors enhancing intermember relations (discussed earlier) will strengthen group cohesiveness as well.
- *Amount of time spent together* and *shared group history:* as part of their natural developmental process, groups with a longer life-span tend to develop stronger intermember ties.
- *The rewarding nature of group experience* for the individual; rewards may involve the joy of the activities, approval of the goals, success in goal attainment and personal instrumental benefits.
- *Group legends:* as Hadfield (1992) points out, successful groups often create a kind of 'group mythology', which include giving the group a name and inventing special group characteristics (e.g. features of dress) in order to enhance the feeling of 'groupness'.
- *Investing in the group:* people tend to become more favourable

toward their group - and thus cohesiveness increases - if they 'invest' in it, that is, spend time and effort contributing to the group goals.
- *Public commitment* to the group also strengthens belongingness.
- *Defining the group against another:* emphasizing the discrimination between 'us' and 'them' is a powerful but obviously dangerous aspect of cohesiveness.
- *Leader's behaviour:* the way leaders live out their role and encourage feelings of warmth and acceptance can also enhance group cohesiveness. Kellerman (1981:16) argues that a prerequisite for any group with a high level of cohesiveness is a leader whose presence is continuously and strongly felt: 'highly cohesive groups are those in which the leader symbolizes group concerns and identity and is personally visible to the membership'. Indeed, one of the surest ways of undermining the cohesiveness of a group is for the leader to be absent, either physically or psychologically.

The role of the teacher as group leader

Although there are a number of factors that contribute to successful outcomes for groups, according to N. W. Brown (1994), none is more important than the group leader. In educational contexts the designated leaders are usually the teachers, and the way they carry out leadership roles has a significant influence on the classroom climate and the group processes. Stevick (1996) expresses this very clearly:

> On the chessboard of academic-style education, the most powerful single piece is the teacher. Society invests him or her with authority, which is the right to exercise power. The personal style with which she or he wields that authority is a principal determinant of the power structure of the class. (p. 180).

The teacher affects every facet of classroom life (see Ehrman and Dornyei 1998; Wright 1987). However, we will restrict our discussion here to one aspect of leadership which has a direct impact on group development, *leadership style.*

In a classic study, Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939) compared the effects of three leadership styles - *autocratic* (or 'authoritarian'), *democratic,* and *laissez-faire.* The autocratic leader maintains complete control over the group; the democratic leader tries to share some of the leadership functions with the members by involving them in decision-making about their own functioning; a laissez-faire teacher performs

very little leadership behaviour at all. Lewin and his colleagues found that of the three leadership types the laissez-faire style produced the least desirable outcomes: the psychological absence of the leader retarded the process of forming a group structure, consequently the children under this condition were disorganized and frustrated, experienced the most stress, and produced very little work. Autocratic groups were found to be more productive (i.e. spent more time on work) than democratic groups, but the quality of the products in the democratic groups were judged superior. In addition, it was also observed that whenever the leader left the room, the autocratic groups stopped working whereas the democratic groups carried on.

From a group-perspective, the most interesting results of the study concerned the comparison of interpersonal relations and group climate in the democratic and autocratic groups. In these respects democratic groups exceeded autocratic groups: they were characterized by friendlier communication, more group-orientedness, and better member-leader relationships, whereas the level of hostility observed in the autocratic groups was thirty times as great as in democratic groups and aggressiveness was also eight times higher in them.

These pioneering results have been reproduced by a great number of studies over the past 50 years, and, based on these, we can say with some conviction that from a group developmental perspective a democratic leadership style is most effective. The authoritarian teaching style 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. Consequently, as Schmuck and Schmuck (1988) argue, autocratic classes are often unable to 'work through' the stages of development and, as a result, frequently 'get stuck' and become stagnant: interpersonal relationships become formalized, distant and fragmented, dominated by cliques and subgroups rather than overall cohesiveness based on peer acceptance, and the group's learning goals and goal-oriented norms are not shared by the students.

An authoritarian role, together with highly structured tasks, however, does appear to many teachers as safer and more efficient than leaving the students, to a certain extent, to their own devices - and indeed the Lewin *et al.* (1939) study did point to the greater productivity of autocratic groups. Also, as Shaw (1981) points out, it is much *easier* to be a good autocratic leader than to be a good democratic leader: it is relatively simple and undemanding to be directive and issue orders, but rather difficult to utilize effectively the abilities of group members. All this means that, as in many cases in education, we have a conflict between short-term and long-term objectives: a tighter control over the students may result in a smoother immediate course and better instant

results, whereas actively seeking student participation in all facets of their learning programme pays off in the long run.

Practical implications

In this last section we present ten practical suggestions which may be helpful in facilitating group development (the list is partly based on Dörnyei and Malderez 1997, which contains further ideas).

1 *Spend some time consciously on group processes.* This is likely to pay off both in terms of L_2 learning efficiency and student/teacher satisfaction.
2 *Use 'ice-breakers' and 'warmers'.* Ice-breakers are activities used at the beginning of a new course to set members at ease, to get them to memorize each others' names, and to learn about each other. 'Warmers' are short introductory games and tasks used at the beginning of each class to allow members time to readjust to the particular group they are now with (reestablish relationships, implicitly be reminded of goals and norms, and at the same time 'switch' from the mother tongue into thinking in and articulating in the L_2).
3 *Promote peer relations* by enhancing *classroom interaction* (using activities such as pair-work, small group work, role-play, 'mixer' classroom organization which not only allows, but encourages people to come into contact and interact with one another, as well as helping to prevent the emergence of rigid seating patterns) and by *personalizing the language tasks* (choosing, when possible, activities with a genuine potential for interpersonal awareness-raising to allow members to get to know each other).
4 *Promote group cohesiveness* by including small-group 'fun' *competitions* in the classes, by encouraging (and also organizing) *extracurricular activities,* and by promoting the creation of a *group legend* (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 such as flags, coats of arms, creating appropriate group mottos/logos, etc.).
5 *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. Specify also the consequences for violation of any agreed 'rule'. It may be a good idea to put group rules (and the consequences for violating them) on display, and, as and when necessary,

re-negotiate them. Then, make sure that you observe the established norms consistently and never let any violations go unnoticed.

6 *Formulate explicit group goals* by having the students negotiate their individual goals, and draw attention from time to time to how particular activities help attain them. Keep the group goals 'achievable' by re-negotiating if necessary.

7 *Be prepared for the inevitable conflicts or low points in group life.* These are natural concomitants of group life which every healthy group undergoes, and you may welcome them as a sign of group development (much as Lz teachers welcome creative developmental language errors), rather than blaming yourself for your 'leniency' and resorting to traditional authoritarian procedures to 'get order'.

8 *Take the students' learning very seriously.* We must never forget that the commitment we demonstrate toward the Lz and the group, the interest we show in the students' achievement, and the effort we ourselves make will significantly shape the students' attitudes to their group and to L_2 learning.

9 *Actively encourage student autonomy* by handing over as much as you can of the various leadership roles and functions to the group (e.g. giving students positions and tasks of genuine authority, inviting them to design and prepare activities themselves, encouraging peer-teaching, involving students in record-keeping, and allowing the group to make real decisions).

10 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 taking the next steps.

Conclusion

We have found group dynamics a very 'useful' discipline with many practical instructional implications. One basic assumption underlying this chapter has been that a real 'group' is a desirable entity, one which will affect the learning outcomes for each group member in the short-term as well as the long term. It is desirable because a cohesive group:

- means established acceptive relationships between all members, which allows for unselfconscious, tolerant and 'safe' L_2 practice;
- allows each member to feel comfortable in the sense of knowing the

rules of the game, which shifts the burden of 'discipline' from the teacher alone, to the group as a whole;
- encourages positive feelings as group goals and individual goals are simultaneously achieved and 'success' is experienced;
- acknowledges the resources each member brings, which can provide the 'content' for an infinite number of *Lz* practice activities of the information, opinion or perception-gap variety.

Valuing what everyone has to offer encourages all members (teacher included) to accept the challenges for their own learning that every group member's contribution can make. In other words, belonging to a cohesive learning group can help members take control of their own learning, as the teacher can neither know, nor 'control' the input from everyone. Learning, here, is viewed in a constructivist sense as 'concerned with how learners self-organise their own behaviour and experience to produce changes which they themselves value' (Thomas and Hari-Augstein 1985); in this sense groups are stepping stones, training grounds for autonomous continuous learning.

Our second assumption has been that as teachers it is valuable to learn more about the 'group', this powerful entity, which can have such an effect on the productivity, quality and impact of learning. By understanding how a group develops, and consciously striving to create and maintain one, we can make classroom events less threatening and more predictable. This is true both for ourselves and the students. In addition, we will develop more efficient methods of classroom management as well as learn from and with our students. Working on the group and with the group puts the excitement back into teaching.

Suggestions for further reading

Dornyei, Z. and A. Malderez. 1997. Group dynamics and foreign language teaching. *System, 25, 65–81.*

Ehrman, M. and Z. Dornyei. 1998. *Interpersonal Dynamics in Second Language Education: The Visible and Invisible Classroom.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Forsyth, D. R. 1990. *Group Dynamics.* (2nd ed.) Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Hadfield, J. 1992. *Classroom Dynamics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schmuck, R. A. and P. A. Schmuck 1994. *Group Processes in the Classroom.* (7th ed.) Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark.

Part C: Questions and tasks

1 Think back on a class you taught recently. Try to recall a particular moment that seemed important to you at the time. Write a detailed description of that particular segment. After several hours, re-read it and underline what seem to be the most important points. Then ask the following questions: Why are these underlined pieces important and how do they connect to issues, concerns or goals I have in my teaching? What can I do in my classes to address what has been raised here in my reflective writing?

2 Make a list of four or five of the most important issues for you in your teaching right now. A few days later, come back to the list and identify one of the issues you would like to focus on for several weeks. Generate ways to address your issue. Keep journal entries about your findings and any sense of progress or change in your teaching as a result.

3 Why do you think that formal teacher education has at times tended to avoid the area of affect? In what ways do you think that this is changing? What benefits might teachers in training receive from practical courses in facilitation, interpersonal skills, group dynamics, values clarification and related work?

4 In what circumstances might it not be appropriate for a language teacher to take on a strongly facilitative role?

5 In Chapter 9 Aoki discusses the social relations supportive of the practice of learner autonomy. In the context of your work, how could you provide your students with this support?

6 Examine your own attitudes to autonomy. How comfortable do you feel working autonomously? Is there a relationship between these attitudes and your feelings about learner autonomy? Reflect on ways to increase your autonomy as a teacher and a person.

7 This volume has referred to the importance of educating students for lifelong learning. In what ways do you prepare your students to continue learning after they have finished your class? What else could you do?

8 Discuss the formation of groups you have participated in. What aspects helped the group to coalesce in its beginning stages? Were there obstacles present which hindered group development? How were they handled?

9 In Chapter 10 Dörnyei and Malderez stress the importance of closure for a group. Brainstorm ways to achieve successful closure for a group. Which of these would be useful in the groups you work with?

10 It is a well-known fact that there exist significant discrepancies between teachers' and students' perceptions of the reality of the classroom. In your experience, why do they exist? What can teachers do to reduce these discrepancies?

11 Teach yourself to apply the Lozanov mirror. First, use Assagioli's 'evocative words' technique to keep the unconscious mind working. Write 'The student is my mirror' on an attractively coloured and shaped piece of paper and stick it on the wall where you work. The conscious mind will cease to notice it but the unconscious will ponder it every time you work. Second, bring in the conscious mind: try to make a habit at the end of every class of reflecting on your interactions with learners that have taken place. Remember that the point is to avoid any kind of blaming or labelling of the learner. Over a period of time observe if there is a shift in your relationship with your learners.