

# The Importance of Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom

Thomas BOUTORWICK\*

## I. Introduction

The human race is no stranger to groups. Groups are formed at all walks of life, can include a plethora of members, or a mere three participants. There can be physical restrictions to the boundaries of the group, for example body weight or height (e.g. heavyweight boxers), or there can be a wider line of inclusion, as in male or female. Groups are unavoidable, and this holds true in the language classroom as well. This means that group dynamics are an important factor when it comes to teaching and learning. This paper discusses key stages in a language classroom group's life cycle, and tenets to keep conscious of regarding why group dynamics in the language classroom are important.

According to Ehrman and Dornyei (1998) stages of a group's life cycle can be classified into 4 groupings: *group formation, transition, performing, and dissolution*. Let's look at each stage briefly.

### 1. Group Formation

This first stage "concerns the initial forming period of orientation and ice breaking." (Ehrman, Dornyei, 1998, p. 109) This stage occurs at the beginning of every school year, and can also occur to an extent at the beginning of each semester, as students tend to change classes, moving from one group to another. This stage is vital to the group in that this initial stage sets the scene for the rest of the time that the group will exist. In this stage, lack of knowledge is abundant: The students do not know each other, the teacher is not familiar with the students, and of course the students are not familiar with the teacher. At this stage, Ehrman and Dornyei posit that students have two main personal tasks: To find an identity in the group without changing their uniqueness as an individual, and to find inclusion socially and personally. The social inclusion comes

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\* Instructor of English as a Foreign Language, Department of Science and Technology, Kwansei Gakuin University

through integration with peers, and the personal inclusion via commitment to the group.

## **2. Transition**

After the ice has been broken, the group enters the transition phase. Tuckman refers to this phase as *Storming*, in that “members tend to express their individuality by becoming hostile toward one another, the leader and the task, thereby resisting the formation of group structure.” (Tuckman, 1965) This is an important time for the teacher. In order for this phase to procure, the teacher must “go with the flow” and let the nature of the group take its course. Ehrman and Dornyei refer to this phase as “the rugged and thorny process of working through conflicts and differences, and establishing a climate that is conducive to fulfilling both the academic and social goals of the members.” (p. 110) Again, it should be kept in mind that troubles and problems that occur during this stage may very well be normal. It is important to hesitate overacting and forcing the group through the phase.

## **3. Performing**

After the storm has passed, the group enters the performing stage. This stage holds characteristics of a group with interdependence. (Agazarian, Peters, 1981) It is at this point that the group has evolved into a well-oiled machine. Socially speaking, the uneasiness from the group formation has dissipated, meaning relationships have begun to and continue to strengthen and form. Also, the group has worked out the kinks, namely because the group norms - overt and covert rules and routines that help to prevent chaos and allow members to effectively go about their business (Dornyei, 2005) - have been established. What results is the group performing actions towards class goals and objectives, academically and socially.

## **4. Dissolution**

This final stage of group formation is usually the most emotionally loaded phase, being that it is the finale of the group and entails the numerous reunion events that get planned at the breakup of the group. At this point in the group’s life, it is important to complete the cycle of the group’s life with formal closing activities. One idea to keep in mind, as Ehrman and Dornyei suggest, is to “include recognizing that something valuable will never exist again in the same way, that relations between members are changing for the good, and that they should celebrate what the group has been able to do.” (1998, p. 152) By showing members of the group what was accomplished in class, be it via verbal speech or examples of projects completed, a sense of cohesiveness comes into consciousness. Another example is to use comparison. Take students’ beginning projects, homework, etc., and compare it to their final assignment. Note key

changes and propose that the group has come a long way. Producing evidence of student progress is one way to finish off the last class of the year.

## **Discussion**

Each of the above stages in the development of a group has key characteristics that can help teachers to ensure smooth transitioning from stage to stage. In effect, this should allow for the group to effectively become cohesive, resulting in the completion see note of curricular tasks. Cohesiveness is, as Ehrman and Dornyei put it, “the ‘glue’ or ‘magnetism’ that holds a group together, consisting of member’s commitment to each other and to the group.” (1998, p. 273) Let’s now consider three ideas that should be kept in mind.

1. Understanding the sequences and similarities that all groups go through can help to make the most at each stage.

It is important to realize that, for example in the group formation stage, students tend to be nervous and unsure about issues including being accepted into the new group, completing course work, and other issues, some that may occur outside of the classroom. This is important especially when teachers think about the first couple classes of the semester. It is important to include into the curriculum activities that promote group interaction. Ice-breakers are an example of this type of activity. An ice-breaking activity helps the group learn about each other. They have the ability to set members at ease while getting them to complete simple tasks including memorizing other student’s names and exchanging personal information. (Dornyei, 2001)

2. Using the knowledge of the dynamics at any stage can help to push the students toward the final goals and objectives of the semester.

Take for example a writing class where one of the main tasks of the semester is to create a five-paragraph essay. Knowing roughly which stage the group is in can help to create a smoother path to the completed essay. Assume that the group is in the transition stage. Being that typical characteristics of this stage include storming - meaning each student may be bringing their guard down and trying to show their individuality- it would be wise to implement activities that allow the students more autonomy from everyone so that they have the chance to express their individuality. Sometimes it is better to let the storm pass rather than interrupt the flow. Interruption can prove detrimental and on some occasions freeze the group in the stage for the rest of the semester or even school year.

3. Using group dynamics to make the group more cohesive produces not only academic, but also interpersonal results.

The more cohesive a group is, the more of a sense of togetherness there is, and the

more commitment to each other and the group there will be. This is important in any language classroom because it can help students to reach their goal of passing the course. This is true especially for the hundreds and thousands of students who take a language as a required course. Their motivation towards the language may not be comparable to those that take language classes of their own volition. This lack of motivation can hurt a variety of facets in the classroom. One important aspect is the group's attitude as an entity. The group will work better if all of its members believe that completing each task along the path to passing the course is important. The cohesiveness level of the group can be improved throughout the course via specific activities and also the teacher's conscious efforts to improve intergroup relations.

## II. Conclusion

Group Dynamics and the language classroom are inseparable. With everything that is happening at the academic level however, the importance of the group can easily be overlooked. All of the time that goes into planning lessons, grading papers and administrative duties can put group dynamics on a back burner. This should be changed. The dynamics of the group are too important and can have outstanding effects when it comes to class environment, student-student relationships, student-teacher relationships, and grades. Research on this subject has revealed that groups tend to go through similar processes, and that understanding these processes can improve a variety of aspects inside and outside of the classroom. Incorporating tasks that use or are related to group dynamics can be beneficial to the language classroom.

## III. References

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