Group Dynamics and SLA: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Groups are central to most teaching approaches, and particularly important in the language classroom where many activities are built around students interacting in pairs or small groups. Despite the central role of group work in language learning there have been relatively few empirical studies considering how groups work together, and the impact that this can have on the language learning process. This paper begins by highlighting the importance of groups within the language classroom, and then proceeds to review research that has investigated group dynamics within an SLA framework. The final section provides some suggestions for areas where research may prove fruitful in aiding our understanding of group processes in the language classroom.

I. Introduction

Most teachers have experienced classes with positive, productive atmospheres where students work together and seem to enjoy the learning process. In the same educational context with comparable students, there are also classes where it is difficult to teach due to the negative classroom atmosphere which works against the teacher and prevents students from active participation in the lesson. Although factors such as time of day, and unhappy randomization of students can be factors, group dynamics undoubtedly plays a large part in this difference.

In this paper I begin by emphasizing the importance of group work when teaching foreign languages, and then discuss the existing empirical research into groups within the field of SLA. Although there have been several authors who have discussed the theory of group dynamics and how it may impact upon the language

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classroom (see Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1997; Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998), the current review is limited to empirical research. The conclusion highlights the need for more classroom-based research in this area.

II. The importance of groups

The widespread use of Communicative-Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) (Willis, 1996) has had a considerable impact on the way in which languages are taught. CLT has little empirical support, but has been has been helped by Long's interaction hypothesis (Long, 1989), which claims that language acquisition occurs when students interact in the target language. Problems with communication lead to negotiation of meaning and forced output (Swain, 1985) where students modify their language to ensure comprehensibility. This enables students to notice the gap between what they want to say and are able to say (Schmidt, 1990), facilitating development of interlanguage, and ultimately second language acquisition.

TBL (Willis & Willis, 2007) followed on from CLT and is an increasingly popular and widespread methodology based on a cyclic framework, where students are engaged with tasks that generally involve some aspect of pair or group work. TBL assumes that students work together in small groups within the classroom in order to accomplish tasks, and it is widely accepted that this will allow the students develop communicative competence, and foster peer learning. It is clear that two prevalent approaches to foreign language education are predicated on extensive use of small groups within the classroom.

Although in general education and psychology there has been much interest in group dynamics (Webb & Palincsar, 1996), small groups, and leadership, with academic journals dedicated to research purely on this topic (*Group Dynamics, Small Group Research, Leadership Quarterly*), researchers in second language acquisition seem to have widely overlooked the topic, with only a limited number of studies which investigate how classroom level and small group level dynamics within the classroom may influence the process of language learning and students' individual experiences in the language classroom. This is puzzling as, perhaps more than in any other academic subject, the interaction that occurs in groups is thought to contribute directly to learning through the medium of the language used, and the use of groups is considered integral to the pedagogy of language teaching.

III. SLA and Group Dynamics

As mentioned previously, although group research is well established in the social sciences, and despite the importance of group dynamics in the language classroom, there have been a relatively small number of studies related to this in the second language learning literature. Researchers have tended to focus on theoretical discussion rather than conducting new research in the classroom, and I will focus on empirical research conducted within the field of SLA for the remainder of this paper.

1. Empirical Studies

One of the first research-based studies that investigated group dynamics in the language classroom was by Clément, Dörnyei and Noels (1994), who considered the influence of group cohesion on motivation, anxiety and self-confidence in a Hungarian EFL context. The participants for the study were 301 third year high school students (17−18 years of age) from 11 different schools chosen at random within Budapest. They completed a battery of measures designed to assess attitudes towards English, anxiety, satisfaction with the course of study, and perceived group cohesion, which was measured using eight items. Teachers were also asked to rate the cohesiveness of the classroom on a seven-point scale in order to confirm the students' perceptions. Students' perceived class cohesion was significantly but weakly correlated with a positive appraisal of the learning environment and, to the surprise of the researchers, did not correlate significantly with other variables such as self-confidence. The authors do not attempt to explain these finding but stress the importance of group dynamics on the language learning process. It should be noted that the main focus of this study was motivation and attitudes towards English, and group cohesion was of more limited interest to the researchers.

The research by Clément et al (1994) was the first in SLA to consider the potential importance of group dynamics and inspired other researchers to begin to consider classroom context in their research designs. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) investigated the interaction between individual and social variables when dyads engage with oral tasks in the classroom. 46 students from 5 high schools in Hungary were recorded completing an oral communicative task, and number of turns and number of words were taken as indicators of task engagement. Individual level variables included English proficiency, L1 willingness to communicate (WTC), and attitudes towards English and the tasks. At the social level they measured perceived group cohesiveness, status within the group in terms of popularity among peers, and the relationship between individuals within each dyad. Students were also recorded performing the same task, with minor modifications, in their first language

in order to provide a baseline measure and allow the language factor to be isolated from other variables. Although the researchers conceded that the research design was simple and correlational, they did find that interest in task acts as a "filter", with linguistic self-confidence, WTC, need for achievement, and status all positively correlated with task engagement for students with positive attitudes towards the task. Conversely, when students had low interest towards the task, only course specific attitudes were significantly correlated with task engagement. This suggest that attitude towards task is the most important overriding factor, subsuming social variables.

Matsumoto (2008) conducted extensive research into classroom dynamics in Japanese university contexts as part of her doctoral studies, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Classroom observations and interviews were used to identify potential problems encountered during student-student, and student-teacher interactions in the classroom, and based on these findings a questionnaire was developed and administered to a large population of Japanese students in tertiary education (n = 793). Matsumoto primarily focused on areas of conflict in the classroom, including the sources of conflict, and how tolerant students were to problems with peers and teachers in the classroom. She found that conflict was present in the classroom, and that there were clear misunderstandings between teachers and students regarding roles in the classroom. Cooperative learning was also investigated, and the author claims that there are considerable problems with implementing this style of learning in university contexts in Japan, where students have learnt to be individualistic and competitive during secondary education, which aims to prepare students for the university entrance exams.

Continuing to focus on groups following on from her dissertation, Matsumoto (2010) considered the impact of group dynamics on the speech of student nurses within compulsory English classes. 74 students in two classes engaged in pair work with different partners over the course of a semester, and questionnaire data suggested that anxiety decreased over time, with positive relations developing within dyads. In the second semester Matsumoto (2010) placed students into groups of four to work together on speeches, and found that positive intra-group attitudes arose, with students forming bonds within groups and wishing to work with the same students for subsequent projects. Positive attitudes to the group were hypothesized to facilitate learning. Interestingly, absenteeism was considered to be an obstacle to effective group work.

In a recent article Chang (2010) investigated the correlation between motivation, which she measured as self-efficacy and autonomy, and group processes which she described using cohesion and norms. A mixed methods approach was adopted with questionnaires followed by interviews. 152 students majoring in

English in the third and fourth year of university in Taiwan were in four pre-formed classes, which became the unit of analysis for the study. The questionnaire was designed to measure autonomy, students' beliefs, group cohesiveness, and norms. It was administered once to all students with 127 respondents. There was no statistically significant difference between the two fourth year classes, but the norms were slightly differently endorsed for the two third year classes. Analysis of the data showed that group processes hypothesized to be represented by cohesion and norms, were weakly related to some aspects of L2 motivation as represented by self-efficacy and autonomy.

Following statistical analysis Chang interviewed three members of each group; one member with a positive view of the classroom dynamics, one negative and one neutral. Interviews revealed that age had an effect on how strongly individuals were influenced by the group, with mature students claiming to be aware of but far less susceptible to group pressure.

Several factors pose a threat to the validity of the findings, including the norms which are assumed to be common across the four classes and therefore measured using a single "one size fits all" approach. Another potential problem is that of mono-method bias, with the use of a single self-report questionnaire to gather all of the quantitative data for subsequent analysis. This leaves the findings open to some doubts, particularly questioning students about their beliefs and then their behavior with regards to autonomy. The need for internal cognitive consistency means that students will modify their responses to behavioral questions to complement their prior responses regarding their beliefs. At a theoretical level it seems difficult to justify the combination of autonomy and self-efficacy to measure motivation. Self-efficacy has been shown to relate to motivation, and Bandura (1997) would consider it to be a precursor of motivation, but not the same thing.

Chang is quick to state the limitations of the study, but refers to the "dearth" of research in this area and states that (2010, p 151) "future research needs to further examine the relationship between group processes and language learning, to unveil the intricate layers yet undetected." Albeit with clear limitations, the study by Chang is a welcome attempt to uncover some of the effects that group dynamics may have on individual students within the language classroom.

For her doctoral research Fushino (2008) focused on students' attitudes to group-work, and how this affected their willingness to communicate (WTC). Some of her findings were published in a recent paper (Fushino, 2010), again highlighting the increasing interest in context and groups with the SLA community. 729 first year university students in Japan completed a questionnaire that aimed to measure students' attitudes towards group work including its value and usefulness, and willingness to communicate (WTC) in group situations. Structural equation

modeling (SEM) was used to test a hypothesized causal link between attitudes to group work and communicative confidence in L2 group work. Results confirmed that attitudes towards group work indirectly affect WTC in L2 group work, via communicative confidence in L2 group work. Although mono-method bias again poses a threat to the results of this study, which relies solely on self-report questionnaires, the research seems to support the importance of student attitudes to group work and demonstrate the impact that these views can have on an important variable such as WTC.

In perhaps the most recent study considering group processes in language classroom, Kozaki and Ross (in press) investigated the influence of context on students' individual gains in language proficiency over a two-year period. The researchers used Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) in order to determine how the difference in attitudes towards English in 72 individual classrooms affected the gains in proficiency of the 1,682 participants, when taking into account individual differences in motivation. From the results the authors claim that the environment can have both positive and negative effects on individuals, with effects of individual motivation on proficiency gains mediated by the specific classroom context. Their study shows that context and groups are very important factors affecting how students will progress in their second language acquisition.

This study by Ross and Kozaki (in press), along with the others discussed previously, highlights the importance of group dynamics within the second language classroom, and begins to shed some light on the processes involved. From a review of the literature it becomes clear that there is a lack of research into groups in the field of SLA, but also that there is a recent increase in interest in this area, with two articles in TESOL Quarterly 2010 devoted to the topic.

2. Future Directions

Interest in group dynamics in the language classroom is increasing, and there are a number of potential areas where empirical research may prove fruitful to our understanding of what is happening in our own teaching contexts. (See Forsyth (2010) for a comprehensive review of group dynamics research in general psychology.) In the field of group dynamics, group development has been an area which has proved to be informative, with groups progressing through different stages and adopting different norms which determine how the group functions, and ultimately how successful they are. As groups form, individuals tend to adopt certain roles, and the structure of groups within language classrooms needs to be investigated. Perhaps one of the key roles in any group is that of the leader, and many groups have both formal and informal leaders, and their influence on the group has been an area investigated extensively in the field of social psychology.

The leader has also been found to have a significant impact on how the group functions and the quality of work that is ultimately produced. Questions such as who emerges as the leader within small groups in the language classroom, and how they influence the other members of the group need to be addressed. All of these areas may prove to be fruitful for researchers in the field of SLA, as all are likely to have a direct impact on the way in which languages are learned in group settings.

IV. Conclusion

It is clear that group dynamics is central to understanding how students perform in the language classroom, and also that at present there is a limited understanding of how this affects the language learning process. General group research has considered group development, roles within groups, and leadership among other topics, and these all seem to be areas worthy of further investigation within an SLA context. I would like to end by urging SLA researchers to consider existing research within the field of group dynamics, and to seek to build upon this knowledge base with investigations into how groups are working together in the language classroom.

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