

Understanding Group Cohesion in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

When students in a cohesive classroom cooperate with each other, they will eventually learn more. In this paper, I review the definition and importance of group cohesion in language classrooms, how group cohesion works, and how it can be promoted. Throughout the review, I draw on my own observations of two actual classrooms, which, in my view, do not have cohesive groups. This paper aims to provide a practical and theoretically-informed understanding of one aspect of effective classroom management, the cultivation of cohesive groups.

Introduction

Every classroom in every school has different characteristics. In my classroom observations, I found two contrasting pictures in two different classes: a quiet, passive adult language classroom consisting of students from Asian countries (hereafter called Classroom A) and a loud, active high school classroom consisting of many Micronesian and some Asian students (hereafter called Classroom B). In spite of their differences, both classrooms exhibited a lack of a sense of belonging. Students in both classrooms seemed to relate only to their close friends.

In Classroom A, the teacher typically conducted three to four activities of 15 to 25 minutes in a two-hour lesson. For example, one day the teacher planned an activity in which pairs of students filled out blanks in, and then practiced, model dialogues. In the next activity, students worked in groups to play charades to review and practice vocabulary and phrases. No matter what activities were planned for a particular day, some routines were the same every day. For example, when students entered the classroom, they smiled and greeted each

other saying “Good morning.” Then, after sitting down in an unoccupied seat, they quietly looked at their textbook and sometimes had a small conversation with neighboring students as they waited for class to begin. The routine was the same after a break in the lesson as well. In Classroom B, the teacher typically conducted four activities of 10 to 20 minutes in a 70-minute topic-based lesson. For example, in a lesson on giving directions, the activities all related to a treasure hunt. In order to teach how to read a map, the teacher used a treasure hunting game with the class as a whole, introducing new phrases related to giving directions (e.g., *Go northeast to the cannibal village*) and then moved on to an activity in which pairs had to come up with 5 directions from the light house to the shipwrecked pirate ship. In this class, Micronesian students were always lively, but easily started to socialize with each other, and thus the teacher sometimes had difficulty having them committed to tasks during the lesson. On the other hand, Asian students were very quiet, but they seemed not much motivated to engage in such tasks. Micronesian and Asian

students in the class rarely talked to each other.

In both classrooms, students did not appear to have a sense of belonging to the class. A sense of belonging can be rephrased as “group cohesion” (Clement, Dornyei, and Noels, 1994 p. 442). According to Clement, et al. (1994), if a classroom has cohesion, the students relate to each other positively, engage in lessons more actively, and eventually learn more. Clearly, it would be ideal if all classrooms, including both of these, became cohesive groups. Therefore, knowledge about group cohesion must be beneficial for not only these two teachers but also for all teachers in general. Thus, this paper provides a review of how positive group cohesion affects students’ language learning as well as how a teacher can promote this kind of cohesion. I focus my review on the following questions: What is group cohesion? Why is it important? How can it be promoted? And finally, how does cooperative learning promote it?

What is Group Cohesion?

According to Forsyth (1990), group cohesion is “the strength of the relationship linking the members to one another and to the group itself” (p. 10). Dornyei and Murphey (2003) defined it as “the closeness and ‘we feeling’ of a group” (p. 62). Group cohesion is derived from at least three constituents: “interpersonal attraction, commitment to task, and group pride” (Mullen & Copper, 1994, p. 220). Thus, the sense of belonging is created by associating with other group members, working toward the same goal, and feeling superior in being a member of the group. As a result, members of a cohesive group actively communicate with each other, positively

take part in discussions, and willingly talk about themselves (Dornyei, 1997) as well as welcome and support each other, which eventually promotes productivity (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003).

Why is Group Cohesion Important?

The cause-effect relationship between group cohesion and productivity has been observed in research. Clement, et al. (1994) and Dornyei (1997) verified in their studies that cohesive groups usually work more productively than non-cohesive groups. At the same time, it should be noted that cohesion can affect productivity either positively or negatively. According to Forsyth (1990), the higher the cohesion grows, the greater the effect becomes. Therefore, as Dornyei and Murphey (2003) stated, group cohesion should coexist with “a strong, goal-oriented productivity norm” (p. 71). A highly cohesive group can achieve great productivity only when the members work toward a mutual goal. Without this goal, a high degree of cohesion may only help members socialize with little productivity. The negative cohesion effect explains why Micronesian students in Classroom B were lively, but not committed to assigned tasks during a lesson. However, the phenomenon may also be a result of “subgrouping” (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003, p. 53), that is, formation of groups within a group based on the natural human desire to stay with one’s own kind, which is often seen in the infant stage of group formation.

The principles of group cohesion can, of course, be applied to a language classroom. According to Stevick (1980), it is the cohesion among students in a classroom more than methodology that

affects successful language lessons (as cited in Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). Senior (2002) suggested that students in a classroom learn a language most effectively when they cooperate with each other as a unified group. Group cohesion makes favorable contributions to language learning (Clement, et al., 1994). Cohesion has now become more beneficial to second language learning and teaching since the current trend is the communicative language approach in which teachers provide lessons that require students to interact with peers in order to develop the students' communicative skills (Clement, et al., 1994; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). In this sense, as Dornyei (1997) stated, "group cohesiveness is one of the most important attributes of the successful communicative language class" (p. 485). Thus, promoting group cohesion among students in a classroom increases effectiveness of students' learning.

How Can Group Cohesion Be Promoted?

Although group cohesiveness can grow gradually through students interacting with each other as a group over a period of time, it does not necessarily do so (Dornyei, 1997). Students in both of these classrooms tended to mingle with the same peers and not to know others well even though they had been together as classmates for more than a semester. Group cohesion is, however, something that can be cultivated (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003).

Cultivation begins with getting to know each other; otherwise students cannot be ready to accept and welcome others (Dornyei, 1997; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). Dornyei (1997) and

Dornyei and Murphey (2003) identify three constituents of group cohesion, which are interpersonal attraction, commitment to task, and group pride, and suggest these subsequent steps that classroom teachers can take to foster it:

- Promoting opportunities in which students physically close the distance (e.g. sitting next to each other) and interact
- Encouraging student cooperation
- Generating rewarding group experiences and organizing extracurricular activities
- Having students cope with difficult tasks together and share common threats, such as nervousness before a big group presentation, and participate in 'intergroup competition' in which students are divided into groups and compete as groups
- Modeling friendly and supportive behavior
- Having students establish group legend, which involves naming a group, setting moral-raising slogans, group symbols, etc.
- Having students establish public commitment, which involves group agreements and contracts as well as wearing school colors or T-shirts
- Investing time in the group in which students spend a lot of time and effort to pursue group goals such as completing a big project

(Dornyei, 1997, pp. 485-486; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003, pp. 21-25, 66-69)

It should be noted here that the suggested strategies need time to be implemented. As Dornyei and Murphey (2003) stated,

building group cohesion is in fact a long-term process. Group cohesion is not something that emerges among students, for example, after just one group activity.

Other factors that affect group cohesion are the teacher's instruction and leadership styles. McDonell (1992) recommended a "democratic" (as cited in Dornyei, 1997, p. 486) instruction style, and Dornyei and Murphey (2003) stated a teacher's role in such a classroom is acting as a facilitator of learning in regard to the leadership style. The common concept behind these styles is that a classroom should be learner-centered, and thus the teacher should step aside and assist students when necessary (Dornyei, 1997; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). At the same time, Dornyei and Murphey (2003) warned that the degree of learner-centeredness should be adjusted according to the level of cohesion developed among the students. At the outset of group development when group cohesion is low, the teacher should be more dominant.

While a learner-centered classroom may help to build group cohesion in some settings, it is not the only means of creating it. For example, Japanese high school classrooms also exhibit a high degree of group cohesion, not because of learner-centered environment but rather because of the unity and homogeneity among the students, created largely by the homeroom-class environment and to some extent by the students' native culture. In Japan, every student belongs to a homeroom class and has a homeroom teacher. They stay with their homeroom classmates in the same room the whole day. Subject area teachers visit their classroom to teach their lessons. There are several school events during the year in which students work together as a

homeroom class, such as singing contest, sports tournament, annual school festival, etc. In my view, such environment gives students opportunities to develop cohesion along the lines listed by Dornyei (1997) and Dornyei and Murphey (2003). Further, the emphasis on group identity and collaboration in the Japanese culture may also help this sense of group cohesion in language classes in Japan.

Compared to high school students in Japan, students in American high school classrooms like Classroom A and B spend less time with their classmates. However, group cohesion can still be fostered in such classrooms by other means, such as cooperative learning.

How Does Cooperative Learning Promote Group Cohesion?

Cooperative learning is an instructional approach which promotes the growth of group cohesion in language classes. According to Johnson and Johnson (1995), "CL [(Cooperative Learning)] is particularly effective in creating cohesive groups" (as cited in Dornyei, 1997, p. 486). In cooperative learning, students in small groups cooperate with each other to complete learning tasks (Richard-Amato, 2003; Dornyei, 1997, Slavin, 1990). In this sense, both of the teachers that I observed implemented some pair and small group activities. For example, in Classroom A, each pair of students filled missing information in and practiced model dialogues. Then, they played charades in groups to review and practice vocabulary and phrases. However, the activities did not seem to cultivate cohesion among students. This could be because, as Dornyei (1997) explained, typical group activities for language learning are not always CL.

According to Richard-Amato (2003) and Dornyei (1997), in order to pursue a group goal in cooperative learning, individual members of a group have to make sure that everyone in the group understands and completes the learning task. As a result, positive interdependence is structured among the students. In addition, in well-designed cooperative learning, students tend to receive a group reward. That rewarding students based on the group's achievement helps foster group cohesiveness more than rewarding them based on individual achievement has been observed in many studies. Slavin (1990) also confirmed the importance of group rewards in research. Furthermore, his study indicated that students are motivated more when they are rewarded for their improvements than when they receive a reward for doing better than others.

Olsen and Kagan (1992) listed five components of an activity that help foster CL: goal, reward, student roles, materials, and rules. Teachers should structure a goal that is shared by group members, rewards that set a group grade in addition to an individual grade, student roles that give individual students responsibilities to achieve the group goal, materials that can be shared by the students, and rules that encourage students to cooperate and accomplish the goal. Slavin (1990) added one more aspect: "equal opportunities for success" (p. 5). In other words, despite individual performance levels, every member of a group can contribute to the achievement of a group goal by doing better than their own past performances. Kagan (1986 & 1994, as cited in Richard-Amato, 2003) lists the following as examples of concrete CL activities:

- Peer tutoring, in which group members teach each other.
- Jigsaw, in which each group member is responsible for learning a specific body of information and is responsible for sharing that information with other group members.
- Projects such as group presentations, in which group members complete the project.

It is important to mention again that working on group cohesion is in fact a long-term process, and, as Richard-Amato (2003) stated, the suggested CL activities generally work well as long-term activities. One CL activity suggested by Slavin (1990) is estimated to take 3-5 class periods:

Student Teams Achievement Divisions (STAD)

Students are assigned to four-member learning teams that are mixed in performance level, gender, and ethnicity. The teacher presents a lesson, and then students work within their teams to make sure all team members have mastered the lesson. Then, everyone in the group has individual quizzes on the material, at which time they may not help one another. Students' quiz scores are compared to their own past averages, and points are awarded to each team based on the degree to which students meet or exceed their own earlier performances. These points are then added to form team scores, and teams that meet certain

criteria may earn certificates or other rewards. (p. 5)

This commitment to gradual development of group cohesion may have been lacking in the classes that I observed. Pair or group activities in both observed classrooms were short, and the members of the pairs or groups tended to be shuffled with each activity. In other words, even though students had several different partners and group members during a class, they could not develop group cohesion along the lines that Dornyei (1997) and Dornyei and Murphey (2003) outlined because they did not have enough time and activity sustainability to invest in long-term pairs or groups.

However, the above discussion does not mean that only long-term activities promote cohesion. According to Richard-Amato (2003), cooperative learning principles can be applied to short-term activities as well, for example, through a short-term group project (e.g., short skit and a small-group discussion) or think/pair/share activities, in which students think about a question or issue, compare their thoughts in pairs, and then share them with a larger group. In my view, if the teacher uses these activities repeatedly and meaningfully with some connection to the students' lives, they may be able to build group cohesion over time.

Using these concepts, both Classroom A and Classroom B teachers may be able to find a way to improve their activities. For example, in the pair dialogue practice activity done in Classroom A, where students filled in blanks and practiced model dialogues, the activity could be transformed into a CL activity by requiring pairs of students to create their own dialogue based on the model dialogue. To accomplish this

additional task, the pairs have to interact, cooperate, and spend time and effort with each other. If one of the students in a pair does not understand the model dialogue, the other student needs to help the partner understand. With regard to the charades activity in Classroom A, after having students play the game in each group, the teacher can have groups compete against each other, so that through the competition students have to pursue a mutual goal. Moreover, by adding such additional tasks, students in a pair or group would stay longer to work together. These improvements can be a solution for a lack of time investment in the group particularly in classrooms like Classroom A because the students in a language school only spend time together during lessons. Although teachers can use short-term activities, they should nevertheless try to include long-term activities in their lessons as well, since they are, in general, the key activities to promote cohesion.

One of the outcomes of cooperative learning is positive "intergroup relations" (Slavin, 1990, p. 5). Slavin (1990) concluded that "CL is an ideal solution to the problem of providing students of different ethnic groups with opportunities for nonsuperficial, cooperative interactions" (p. 51). In my view, the distance between different ethnic groups, as well as among other subgroups of students, in both classrooms A and B could be closed by means of long-term CL activities.

Finally, Johnson and Johnson (1995) indicated that students must be taught social skills as one of the prerequisites for a successful cooperative learning. They stated "we are not born instinctively knowing how to interact effectively with others. Interpersonal and group skills do

not magically appear when they are needed” (as cited in Dornyei, 1997, p. 484).

Teaching social skills would be necessary in Classroom B. Micronesian and Asian students in the class rarely talked to each other. In one map reading activity, every student had the same map and was asked to color it. One Chinese female student wanted to use a blue pen, but a Micronesian male student was using it. Instead of saying “Can I use the blue pen after you?” she sat quietly, looking at the other student, and just waited until the pen became available. It is possible that the student did not know the proper way of asking for such things in English, but it is also possible that she did not feel as comfortable trying to ask as she might have if the student with the pen had been Asian. As Johnson and Johnson (1995) mentioned, students in ESL classes may only be aware of the social skills that are appropriate in their home countries (as cited in Dornyei, 1997). In addition, based on my experience of living abroad as a foreigner, it is quite difficult to notice what social skills are appropriate in a certain country. Therefore, the explicit teaching of social skills may be valuable for students who are investing several years of study in a degree program in an

English speaking country as well as for those who have moved to a new country.

Conclusion

Cohesive groups usually work more productively than noncohesive groups when working with each other toward a mutual goal. With the trend of communicative language approach, group cohesion is one of the key characteristics of a successful communicative language class. Group cohesion in language lessons can be promoted by stimulating three constituents of group cohesion: interpersonal attraction, commitment to task, and group pride. One approach for language instruction that can be used for promoting group cohesion is cooperative learning. CL activities generally work well over a long term, but its principles can be applied to short-term activities as well. Although teachers can use short-term activities, they should nevertheless try to include long-term activities in their lessons as well, since long-term activities are, in general, the key activities to promote cohesion. Finally, training in social skills also helps to foster group cohesion. It would be beneficial for teachers to understand the benefits of group cohesion in language classrooms and to foster it by implementing cooperative learning activities.

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