

GROUP COHESION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract

Research confirms that situation-specific factors contribute significantly to EFL motivation in a classroom context and call for a new approach that would be more pertinent to foreign language teaching. This approach specifically involves increasing the classroom relevance of group cohesion research and demands an awareness of the social and psycholinguistic correlates of pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: group cohesion, motivation, psycholinguistics, foreign language learning

Introduction

A concept central to the explanation of many group-related phenomena is “group cohesion” or “the strength of the relationship linking the members to one another and to the group itself” (Forsyth, 1990: 10). Group cohesion is taken as an index of the level of group development, directly related to within-group co-operation and to both the quality and quantity of group interaction. Ellis’s (1994) analysis addressing the relationship between group cohesion and group performance found a significant positive relationship between the two variables, indicating that cohesive groups, on average, tend to be more productive than non-cohesive groups.

The context

In this study we seek to re-examine the pertinence of the psycholinguistic perspective to foreign language acquisition within the perimeter of the English language classroom in the Romanian mono-cultural environment of the early 2000s. It is a context in which person to person contact with native speakers of English is still reduced and a significant number of students still see English as just another school subject. Nevertheless, students do have an ever-increasing contact with English language and culture through the media and through the use of high technology aids.

Current language teaching methodologies in Romania promote classroom interaction among learners in order to develop the students' communicative competence. The quality and quantity of such interaction is, to a large extent, a function of the social structure and milieu of the class, of the perceived value of the teacher and the perceived value of the English course (Hadfield, 1992; Prabhu, 1992). Studies of student interaction in the English class have particular relevance to pedagogic decisions and to the understanding of student motivation because English language classes have more interactive group dynamics than other classes do. In Romania this finding is substantiated through the work of the British Council in developing student-centred methodology. In the context of new English coursebooks and teacher training courses, communicative techniques are solidly anchored in the Romanian EL classroom in spite of the teachers and administrators who still question the value of shifting the focus of the classroom from teacher-centred to group/student-centred.

To be successful in implementing this fashionable methodology, a teacher has to be a skilful facilitator of group cohesion and team building. For the purposes of this study, we were interested in finding out the worth of an extensive use of communicative and co-operative learning strategies and the effect of cohesive group dynamics vis-à-vis the more traditional psycholinguistic research elements. More specifically, we tried to put together a research tool that would help us determine the effect that class cohesion has on self-confidence and motivation for foreign language learning. At each stage of our research we strove to correlate the results of previous studies with new variables for the design of a subsequent study. This sort of reiterative planning and study design has allowed us to keep consistent types of materials and procedures and to introduce new categories of subjects and new variables at different moments in time. We consider it important to establish causative or reciprocal relationships among the variables in a model which would encompass psycholinguistic elements of individual learning, social elements of classroom dynamics, and pedagogical implications which might have an impact on the other two.

Our starting assumption was that within the context of the Romanian EL classroom of the early 2000s, cohesion would be directly related to student motivation and self-confidence. However, because the positions stated below are all supported by different groups of educators in Romania, we also considered the possibility of finding support for any of the following interrelationships of group cohesion, motivation and self-confidence.

- cohesion has a direct, positive influence on self-confidence and motivation;
- cohesion is not related to self-confidence and motivation: this possibility presupposes that self-confidence is an individual trait, i.e. that a person simply is or is not self-confident;

- cohesion has a direct, negative influence on confidence and motivation: this possibility presupposes that student motivation would decline if classes were no longer-teacher centred, as class discipline would decline.

Being aware of contextual variations in the structure and importance of affective predisposition, we deem that a process of building self-confidence could become one of the most important boosters of student attitude and effort in the area of EFL. Self-confidence in using English, operationally defined in terms of low anxiety effect and high-perceptions of English language competence, does not necessarily need to be developed through direct contact with native speakers; it can also be developed through the media, foreign travel, or through positively experienced classroom processes. Having this in mind, we set out to establish our goals, of which the first was to assess the relevance for the EFL teaching context of the average Romanian language class of social-psychological and psycholinguistic factors that had been considered influential motivational aspects in other L₂ contexts. Let it also be known that our context was marked by the absence of native speakers of the target language. Some factors of particular interest:

- the role and nature of affective predisposition in the Romanian context;
- the role and nature of self-confidence;
- the relative importance of classroom dynamics.

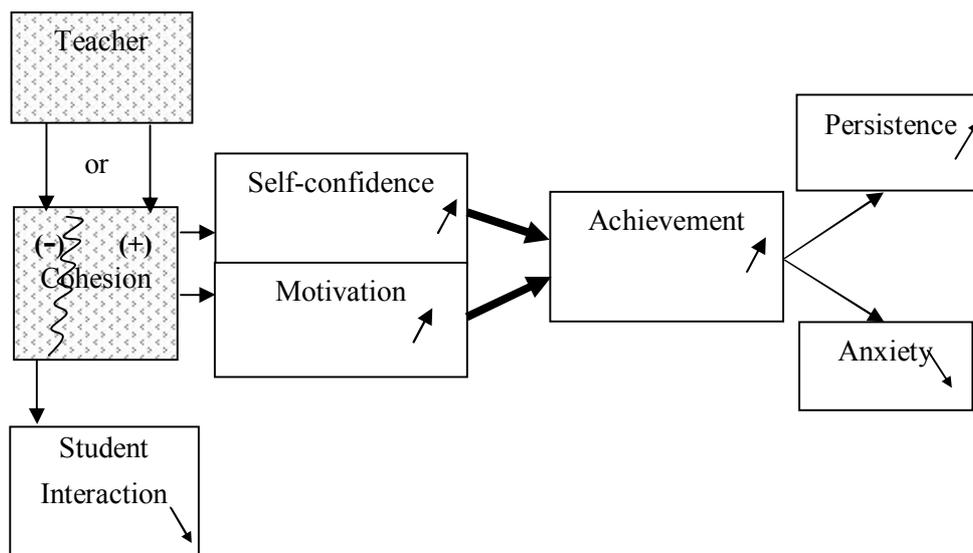


Figure 1

The second goal of the study was to examine whether the teacher can facilitate the reduction of anxiety and the development of intrinsic motivation by applying pedagogy that stimulates group dynamics and enhances group cohesiveness.

The flow chart in Figure 1 is a working hypothesis for our data analysis related to self-confidence, motivation and group dynamics in the English language classroom; as such, it reflects what we expected to find in our research:

- the teacher influences class cohesion;
- class cohesion increases self-confidence and motivation;
- self-confidence and motivation increase achievement;
- achievement increases persistence;
- achievement decreases anxiety;
- lack of class cohesion reduces student interaction.

Participants and materials

The participants were 182 high school students from 7 different forms at 6 schools in Iași. Special care was taken to select a mix of schools in terms of both prestige and location. The participating students were all in the second last year of their high school instruction (ages 16-17) and they all studied English as part of the national school curriculum. Twenty-nine of these students were enrolled in vocational high schools. The curriculum was the same for all, no intensive English or bilingual classes were included in the study because, among other things, these usually had a native-speaker teacher of English.

As concerns the materials, they consisted of a questionnaire for the students and one for the teachers, both in Romanian. The students' questionnaire mainly focused on attitudes, motivation, anxiety and group cohesion. The items were randomly arranged and students indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a 6-point scale. The items targeted were instrumental and integrative motivation, knowledge and socio-cultural dimensions, attitude toward learning English, attitude toward native speakers, need for achievement, and desire for English proficiency. In terms of breakdown of items, the list included

- English use anxiety (4 items, 2 positively and 2 negatively worded)
- satisfaction (2 items with a 6-point scale)
- motivational intensity (4 items)
- frequency and quality of contact with native speakers (2 items with a 9-point scale)
- English class anxiety (5 items)
- perceived group cohesion (8 items)
- English teacher evaluation (competence, rapport, motivation, teaching style, and personality)

- English course evaluation (attractiveness, difficulty, relevance, usefulness)
- self-evaluation of English language ability (4 items with 6-point scales, one for each skill)

In their turn, the teachers were asked to use a 10-point scale to evaluate their students on:

- general quality of homework
- classroom activity
- motivation
- status among peers
- current level of achievement in active communication
- current level of achievement in passive knowledge of English.

Main findings of the study

Based on the resulting data, we put together a two-pronged schema relative to the student lacking in self-confidence (aka the ‘potentially self confident’ student or the ‘not yet self-confident’ student)) and to the student who comes to class already self-confident, respectively. For the former category, the relevant findings of our study include:

- The teacher influences class cohesion.
- Class cohesion produces a positive perception of the learning environment by the student.
- In this learning environment, teacher - student group - task are viewed as an interdependent cluster.
- This perception leads to student achievement.
- Student achievement reduces anxiety.
- Student achievement leads to self confidence and to motivation.
- Self-confidence leads to more achievement than to more self-confidence.
- Anxiety is not caused by student perception of aspects of the classroom situation.
- Motivation leads to more achievement than to more motivation.
- The motivation produced by class achievement in the cohesive environment is related to the group; it is not integrative, nor related to the teacher or to the task/language.
- Achievement leads to persistence in EL study.
- Persistence leads to proficiency.

For the latter category of students:

- Self confidence leads directly (through effort) to achievement.
- Self confidence leads indirectly (through attitude) to achievement.
- Attitude and the effort index are related to the learning environment cluster.
- Self confidence does not come from a positive perception of the learning environment.
- Self confidence is not affected by a positive perception of the learning environment.
- Self-confidence does not come from a cohesive group environment.
- Motivation is integrative – it is related to the task/language.

Two case studies

The two profiles described above will be briefly illustrated by means of two case studies involving students with an interesting experience. Oana, a potentially confident student, was an extremely shy, passive participant in a pre-intermediate and intermediate language course lasting six months. She frequently disrupted the English language production of her classmates by chatting with them in Romanian during classes and breaks. In an effort to build class cohesion, students were repeatedly asked to address personal subjects such as hobbies, pets, or favourite people in peer writing tasks, in small group conversations, and in class discussions. When it became obvious to her peers that the only subject Oana was able or willing to talk about in English was animals, the class encouraged her with questions, books, and other clues of affection and support which were all related to her favourite subject. During the last month of class Oana told a story about her pet dog which kept her in active production of English for about 7 minutes to the obvious amazement and satisfaction of her classmates and to her own delight. After this achievement, Oana's self confidence increased, as did her interactions with her classmates in the target language.

The second example that of Carmen refers to an already confident student. As a 3rd year university student, her performance was characterized by lack of cohesion due to erratic attendance and low motivation (in a non-graded course). Though not an English major, Carmen was highly motivated to take advantage of the opportunity to improve her academic writing and conversational style in the practical skills class. Her proficiency level, high from the start, improved directly, due to great effort, and indirectly, due to a positive attitude toward achievement of proficiency in English (intrinsic motivation). Her effort was reflected in the quality of written assignments and in her voluntary website searches for class reference material. Her positive attitude was reflected in her consistent attendance, the ease of interacting in English with the teacher during chance social encounters about town, and extra-curricular activities related to foreign language acquisition. In Carmen's case the

lack of cohesion in class did not affect her self-confidence or her achievement which was at an extremely high level of proficiency.

These results give empirical grounding to developments in foreign language methodology, whereby group dynamic activities are incorporated into the EL syllabus in order to foster various aspects of group development and enhance group cohesion with the aim of creating an environment more conducive to learning (Hadfield, 1992). While validating the necessity of looking at the student through the eyes of the teacher, as we have done, our findings indicate that, in future too, it is imperative to look at the task of learning another language through the eyes of the student. This type of research convincingly reveals foreign language acquisition to be a complex social process.

Here are some of the findings that confirm our hypotheses:

- English achievement is related significantly to self-confidence, the evaluation of the learning environment, and the motivational scores.
- The attitude and the effort index is also related to self-confidence, the learning environment and a cluster of affectively-based attitude and motivation.
- Cohesion is associated to a positive perception of the learning environment.

Conversely, there are a number of findings that disprove our earlier hypotheses:

- Intrinsic motivation was not correlated with the evaluation of the learning environment, or with the cohesion index.
- Our results do not support current suggestions that the source of anxiety lies in the student's perception of certain aspects of the classroom situation.

All in all, the results suggest that classroom context and extracurricular contact activities may indirectly affect language self-confidence, as would be expected from an interactive model of language learning. On the one hand, good classroom atmosphere promotes student involvement and activity that in turn moderates anxiety and promotes self-confidence. On the other hand, the point of classroom interaction is to stimulate the use of the foreign language in authentic communication outside the classroom. As a result of such extra-curricular linguistic interaction, the student returns to the classroom with a certain level of self-confidence/anxiety the quality and quantity of which then influence classroom behaviour, achievement and anxiety. Consequently, being active in class means believing that one is able to use English outside the classroom. With direct reference to case study 1, *Carmen will produce in class*. Even in mono-cultural

Romanian classrooms, where there is minimal contact with the foreign language community, this "real" world can therefore be an important source of "good/bad" experiences with actual consequences which challenge the students and generate self-confidence/anxiety. With reference to case study 2, *Oana will/will not produce in class* (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989).

Conclusion

Our initial pre-requisite was that class cohesion, motivation and self confidence are directly connected in the context of the EL classroom in non intensive high school classes in Romania. In retrospect, the findings of our study lead us to a different perspective which moves these three variables out of direct connection with each other. Whereas the teacher used to be the starting point of schematic representation of the variables shown in Figure 1, it is now the student who stands at the centre of the diagram, separated schematically from cohesion in the classroom by the necessary step of "perceiving a learning environment." The student is also separated schematically both from self-confidence and from motivation by the necessary step of "achieving" in the sense of communicative production of English in the classroom. It is clear from the amended model that some students bring motivation with them to the EL classroom while others do not. The already motivated students can perceive a learning cluster of interdependent elements: the teacher, the task, and the student group. These motivated students benefit from the learning cluster, but because they are already self-confident, their perception of the classroom affects their attitude and their effort by intensifying achievement. These intrinsically motivated students tend to persist in language study toward proficiency levels.

Students who are neither motivated nor confident when they come to EL classes are not directly motivated by cohesive group dynamics. First they must develop a positive perception of the learning environment, and only then can they experience achievement through communicative production of English with their peers. With this achievement comes self confidence which spirals back into further achievement. With the communicative achievement an extrinsic/social motivation is developed that relates specifically to the group, not to the teacher or to the task. This motivation is beneficial to the student because of the backwash effect which stimulates further achievement in communicative English in the classroom.

It is equally evident that the intrinsically motivated students perceive, appreciate and benefit from the learning cluster of teacher/task/group that the teacher develops in the cohesive EFL classroom. This type of student has intrinsic motivation however, and is a high achiever with or without the benefit of skilful pedagogy. On the other hand, most students in the context of the non-intensive FL classroom in

Romanian high schools do not have intrinsic motivation for the ‘beauty’ of the language, intercultural appreciation or appreciation of the ‘task’ of language learning. In traditional competitive language learning environments, these students will continue to be underachievers. If the teacher does not make pedagogical choices which provide cohesion to the class and thereby stimulate the perception of a positive learning environment, these students will never reach communicative levels in the foreign language. It is only through this perception that anxiety can be reduced, and self-confidence and motivation for social interaction with the peer group developed. Because they are sensitive to the positive pressure of the group which responds to their initial achievement with positive feedback, it is group cohesion that encourages their further achievement and self confidence while also lowering their anxiety. In other words, all that the teacher can do for students like Oana is provide them with a comfortable learning environment while they gather their courage to communicate with their peers in the English language classroom. Because Oana is rather typical of the Romanian high school student, we, as educators, need to give a lot of attention to such students. There is hope, therefore, that a well-balanced implementation of pedagogy can contribute to empowering students with a lifelong skill for language learning.

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