METHODOLOGY REVIEW

A student-centred approach to language teaching

An integrated classroom group makes language learning more efficient, says Zoltán Dörnyei and Kata Gajdátsy. In their first article, they suggest ways of achieving this, through student-centred organisation and teaching.

The concepts of the person-centred approach have appeared in language teaching methodology through the humanistic techniques in general, and more specifically through Community Language Learning (CLL). The two authors of this article, a psycholinguist and a psychotherapist, have been working together with an adult EFL group for almost two years and have tried to find those aspects of the person-centred approach that can successfully be applied to language teaching of all age groups.

Group dynamics

Every group undergoes a unique, long-term process of internal development. The person-centred approach claims that with good conditions this development will result in an organic, self-sufficient cohesion within the group. A creative, well-balanced group has vast resources of its own, which we believe can be exploited for more intensive and efficient language learning.

According to the person-centred principles, the group leader should not be directive but should facilitate the internal 'growth' of the group by providing a safe climate, preventing any rigid patterns, releasing the atmosphere, and by handling the inevitable ups and downs.

While there are no exact recipes on how to achieve this, in this article we will highlight some points which need special attention in the language class.

First steps

1. English first names — getting a special name in the group might be the first step to becoming a group member. It is extremely important that the students like their names, as these will often become a part of their identities.

2. Icebreaking - the members of a new group are always full of anxiety. Short introductions normally do not result in real acceptance of each other. You should find icebreakers (1) where the students can get to know each other on as many different levels as possible. They should see the others moving, hear their voices, talk to them, establish some personal relationship with everybody during the very first classes. Detailed planning of these first encounters is of crucial importance. Lively, rapid rotation of icebreakers will also open up shy, withdrawn students.

3. Old members, new members - using icebreakers and warmers is very important after longer holidays or at the beginning of each term even if the group consists of the same old members. Should there be any newcomers, a special effort must be made to integrate them into the old group so as to avoid the formation of cliques.

4. Norms — a language teaching process requires some set structures and rules, for example, doing homework, not being late. It is very difficult for a liberal teacher to decide what to do if this structure is violated. By disciplining he/she will fall back into an authoritative role. The solution might be agreeing on a definite set of indispensable rules at the beginning. If the group consistently feels that you take these group norms seriously there is a very good chance that they will accept them as necessary for the group to function.

Preventing static groups

1. Seating — a group can very easily become static and thus some unwanted fixed patterns might develop. One way to avoid this is by changing the order of seating regularly. In the first few lessons it is worth moving people round even during an individual lesson.

2. The space used by the teacher — teachers tend to stay in specific areas of the classroom. These are partly defined by the location of the equipment, for example, the blackboard, and partly by the teacher's 'sense of space'. Varying the space patterns of the classroom can have a dynamic effect. And it is quite an experience for yourself!

3. Pair work, group work, movement — working in pairs and small groups with different partners always has a beneficial effect on keeping the group open and flexible. The same thing is true of activities involving movement. Even mechanical drills can be made rhythmical and varied by doing them in different group formations or by standing up.

4. How to form small groups — we have used four ways depending on the atmosphere and the language task:
   a) The teacher selects the groups — a safe way to achieve efficient group work. Students, however, soon work out the basis of selection and thus some of them might feel pigeon-holed.
   b) Drawing lots — students tend to like it as it is adventurous.
   c) Students choose their own partners — this gives them a free hand in arranging interactions, and they share

Vary positioning of furniture during group work to create a more dynamic class atmosphere
some responsibility too. In an accepting and caring atmosphere nobody will feel excluded.
d) The group decides democratically which of the above alternatives to choose. In our group their choice varied a lot from session to session.
We have found that in many cases a small group that we had considered problematic turned out to be efficient; withdrawn or slow students performed better when not dominated by the bright ones.
5. Role-plays and sketches — mini-
theatre performances greatly improve speaking skills, and by hiding behind a mask students can safely experiment with their own identities. Reserved stu-
dents often find their individual styles in these situations.
6. Personalising the classroom — one
way to achieve this is by rearranging the furniture. We have tried four alter-
natives:
a) Desks in a semi-circle — slight
departure from the traditional author-
itarian setting.
b) Random positioning of furniture —
for games and group work.
c) Chairs in a semi-circle — by doing
away with the safety of the desks close-
ness and cohesion can be obtained.
d) Chairs in a full circle — the teacher
does not have a distinguished place any
more and a circle can bring the group
together.
Small gestures like bringing in
flowers can also personalise the formal classroom while soft drinks and snacks have also been successful in releasing tension. Finally, we always have music before class and in the breaks, and very often during exercises too.

Ups and downs
1. Initial v permanent group level —
a general feature of group dynamics is
that the initial impetus gradually fades
out and gives way to a steadier, perma-
nent functioning level. The first,
inspired ‘honeymoon’ period should be
exploited thoroughly to establish the
basis of the later work. Without long-
term planning this smooth and lively
stage will not last long. In our expe-
rience, the emerging everyday level is
determined by three factors:
a) The mutual acceptance and observ-
ance of the introduced norms.
b) The self-reliance of the group — this
involves self-organising ability, growing
group confidence and shared respons-
bility, which will result in students
working together for a common goal.
c) A crucial factor is the devotion of
the teacher to which the group is very
sensitive. In this respect, an enthusiastic
and motivated beginner is better than an
experienced but overburdened teacher.
2. When the group is down — do not panic! It inevitably happens once in a
while. One of the best ways to release
tension is to talk about it. This might
even be a language exercise: sitting in
a circle everybody should complete a
sentence like / feel awful/depressed
because... In a safe atmosphere this
ought to lead to a lively discussion.
Your role is not to give advice or offer
solutions but rather to listen to every-
body carefully. A well-functioning
group can cope with its problems.
3. Success — this is the best motiva-
ting factor. At some points of language
learning every learner feels that his/her
efforts are in vain. In such cases it is
worth slowing down the teaching pace
and giving the students tasks in which
they are proficient.
4. Personal talks — group members
sometimes need personal caring. Having
a word with them privately might
provide the needed impetus to sort out
their problems. But when? We always
arrive well before our classes to be avail-
able. In secondary schools, however,
this may not work and some other
solution must be found. Personal
comments written on their homework
or papers also plays an important role.
5. Temporary group passivity — it is
very often caused by some outside
circumstance, for example, a change in
the weather or an extremely tiring day.
A powerful attempt to stir up the group
might totally drain your energies. Some-
times it is better to relax and accept the
situation. You should not push anything
too hard but rather offer them alter-
natives to choose from.

Aspects of teaching
1. Balance — the learners’ language
confidence is very shaky. Losing their
internal balance might completely block
their achievement. Therefore, new
material should be presented in consum-
able bites and after some ‘heavy stuff’
to counter-balance their ‘don’t know’
feeling with confidence-raising language
tasks.
2. Grammatical rules — it is worth
stressing that a foreign language is not a
huge amount of information to be
memorised, it is a new dimension of the
learner’s personality. Native speakers
themselves often break grammar book
rules.
Over-detailed grammatical explana-
tions very rarely fulfill their purpose. We
have always tried to explain only the
essence of the rules and then let the
students master the details in practice.
When a new structure first appeared we
gave a brief explanation and added, “but
this is something we’ll learn later’.
Explicit categorisation should come only
after they have become familiar
with the new phenomenon.
3. To correct or not to correct —
we do not like correcting verbal mis-
takes too much because it shakes the
learner’s language confidence. The
correction of written homework with
detailed personal comments, as well as
the requirement to rewrite every
corrected sentence for the next time,
have proved to be more useful.
4. Tests — these may serve as an
efficient control framework to hold
together a loose learning process. If they
are not used punitively, then students
tend to like them as they can assess
what they have achieved; and besides,
they find them a good learning tool too.
Very often we got them to correct their
papers themselves.
5. Lesson-planning — our main
concern was to plan the rhythm and
process of the lessons. What should be
the proportion of different kinds of
interaction? Of the structured and
unstructured parts? Of directed and
free language tasks? An important but
often neglected point is to mix static,
sitting tasks with activities involving
movement.

The teacher’s role
1. The teacher as a facilitator — the
traditional, authoritative teacher-role
does not fit into a group-centred set-up.
The facilitator in a student-centred
classroom is equal to the group
members. Although he/she has a
distinguished role as the group leader,
the less directly he/she behaves the
better facilitator he/she becomes.
2. The teacher as the language-
knower - the language teacher need not
hide his/her imperfections. Nothing is
more relaxing for the group than the
teacher’s natural acceptance of the gaps
and uncertainties in his/her knowledge.
Non-native teachers have an advantage
in this respect as they are constant
learners themselves too.
3. The teacher as a human person —
just like everybody else, language teach-
ers are sometimes depressed or worn-out.
In an accepting and trustful atmosphere
there is no need to pretend the opposite.
The teacher can build on the group just
as the group builds on him/her in other
cases. In fact, any unnatural, insincere
behaviour might cause more tension
than the teacher’s lack of vitality.
In the second part of this article we
will focus on Community Language
Learning which is the most direct
adaptation of a student-centred
approach in language teaching.

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Reference
(1) For specific examples see Icebreakers
by Alison Coulthm (P.E.T. September, 1984).
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Community Language Learning helps improve group relationships while generating real communication. Zoltan Dornyei and Kata Gajdatsy describe how it can be successfully applied in class.

Following on from the first part of our article (March '89) which dealt with the implications of student-centred teaching on group development, Community Language Learning (hereafter CLL) now deserves special attention as this method is entirely based on the person-centred concept of group dynamics. In addition, we have found it an outstanding language teaching technique too.

Apart from being a non-traditional method, it is often said that CLL is time-consuming and difficult to integrate into a formal curriculum. Foreign language syllabuses are so crowded as a rule that teachers are reluctant to experiment with something completely different. On the other hand, CLL is a method where being a non-native teacher is an advantage, as it is almost indispensable for the students and the teacher to share a common language.

A CLL session

We have treated CLL as a supplementary activity. The sessions usually took place once every two weeks. The procedure was as follows:

Stage 1 (20 minutes): Students sit in a closed circle in the middle of which there is a tape recorder. The task is to make a joint recording. The topic is completely up to the group: it can range from a specific subject matter to everyday chat. If someone has something to say he/she can first think it over, can ask for help from the teacher who stays outside the circle and whispers the answer into the student's ear. When the student feels ready to speak he/she pushes the recording button and records the sentence. The teacher does not interfere with the process, avoiding even eye-contact.

We have fixed the length of this stage at 20 minutes, which would give a five-seven minute recorded dialogue. Very often some students do not say a word during this time. This does not mean that they are not involved. They actively listen but are not ready to talk for some reason.

Stage 2 (five-seven minutes): The recorded dialogue is replayed.

Stage 3 (10 minutes): The teacher joins the circle and asks everybody to make some comments on what he/she has noticed or experienced about himself/herself during the recording and replaying of the dialogue. Students are free to speak in their mother tongue if they wish. In our group the native language at first dominated; later, however, the amount of English increased. This feedback stage plays an important role in releasing tensions. The teacher makes no comments but listens to everybody very carefully and understandingly.

Stage 4 (five-15 minutes): The recording is played again and some incorrect sentences are written on the blackboard. They are discussed and corrected together. At home we type the dialogue correctly.

Follow-up

The general guidelines for CLL normally end at the point of handing out the typed copies to the students. We have felt, however, that additional follow-up exercises are needed.

1. Everybody gets a typed copy on which the names of the speakers are left out. They should be filled in individually or in groups.
2. Students read out their own sentences as normally as possible.
3. They listen to the recording while following the corrected text.
4. We discuss the corrections — the mistakes have a high diagnostic value.

From this point on the typed text can be exploited during the subsequent classes just like any textbook dialogue. The series of dialogues, in fact, could make up a private coursebook. These texts, however, are highly personal and contain expressions and language forms that the students really needed. New material may come in through the teacher's help and the corrections.

Using CLL dialogues

The following are several methods from Exploiting textbook dialogues dynamically (1) as well as some new techniques which have been used successfully with CLL texts.

1. Students work in pairs or small groups. Someone reads out the dialogue in bits, the others repeat or immediately translate what they have heard.
2. Someone translates the utterances, and the others put them back into English.
3. Only the keywords of each utterance are provided, and students reconstruct the sentences: *anybody* likes *skiing* → *Is there anybody who likes skiing?*

In the first stage of a CLL session students sit in a circle and jointly record a dialogue — the teacher helps only when asked to
4. Students vary the original sentences by colouring them with extra words, for example, you know, to tell the truth, or by paraphrasing some structures and applying synonyms.

5. They extend the utterances so that the hidden message, the real speech function comes explicitly to the surface: Mary, are you tired? → Mary, you don't look very well. What's the problem? Is there anything wrong?

6. By picking out some sentences from the text students construct a new dialogue, which is a good exercise if the text is rather long. Of course originally adjacent sentences cannot be used together. You may allow them to change or add a word where necessary.

7. The teacher collects some functional sentences/idioms that have parallels in the text — students must spot these, for example, T: / had a nice time, S: (from the text) / enjoyed myself.

8. Sitting in a circle each student says a word (or a sentence or an idiom) he/she particularly liked in the text. Go round quickly several times.

9. The homework was usually to pick out and paraphrase 15 sentences. We have spent five-15 minutes with the typed texts in every class. Students wrote a test on each dialogue: normally a translation into English based on the original sentences of the dialogue. We accepted every appropriate solution.

**Educational value**

CLL proved to be an excellent language exercise. The recording situation is closer to real life than most classroom activities: real communication takes place with real tension. At first the students had some reservations, but after about the third session they realised the learning potential of the method and looked forward to future sessions.

On the surface, the recorded and typed dialogues are independent of the official curriculum. We found, however, that the new material always turned up in the texts sooner or later. The structures and lexis of the CLL texts were fixed in the students' memories and they could apply them in other situations too. Thus CLL efficiently develops speaking skills and active vocabulary. Because of correction and grammatical discussion the method also improves language accuracy.

**Group value**

From the point of view of group dynamics CLL is equally useful. It is a real community activity, and the recorded interactions enable the group to realise and sort out some existing tensions. We have got to know each other from a new angle.

It is important to stress that CLL is a safe technique. The tensions generated by the recording sessions reflect the tension of real life situations and provide the student with a stepping-stone out of the over-protective environment of the language classroom. This tension, however, is released during the feedback stage, so no bad memories are left behind. The texts can be further exploited in various ways which will always be lively since the starting point is personal language material.

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Reference