

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT & GROUP DYNAMICS

The individual within the group

Every group is different, as all tutors of foreign-language learners know. The group may be composed of learners of the same or mixed nationality; learners may be monolingual, bilingual or multilingual; they may be beginners, intermediate, advanced, or form part of a group with a range of language levels; the learners' ages may be similar or differ widely and finally the group may be predominantly male or female, or be equally balanced. Senior management may be represented in the group, alongside new and junior members of the same organisation.

Other relevant factors which contribute to the group-mix and which the tutor may wish to know prior to the outset of a course in order to draw up a group profile are whether attendance on the course is compulsory or voluntary, the time available for self-study, the learners' attitudes to the target language, previous success or failure in the target language or lack of exposure to it, and differences in educational background of the participants.

The tutor will also take into consideration personality factors which influence the learner's participation in the learning experience. These include individual preferences for particular teaching and learning styles; response to interactive techniques; fear of performing in the target language, fear of failure and finally the capacity to tolerate errors in oneself and others.



Experienced tutors will have their own repertoire of strategies for encouraging a group to work together



The tutor and the group formation process

Experienced tutors will have their own repertoire of strategies for encouraging a group to work together, whilst allowing for individual differences. The current climate in language teaching, which places the learner at the centre of the curriculum, has produced sensitive needs-analysis and ongoing 'feedback techniques' which help the tutor to get to know each group fairly quickly; and enabling him or her to continue to be receptive to their needs. On short courses this is essential.

If a tutor has been involved in designing a pre-course questionnaire, this tuning-in process is greatly helped. This is helpful in addressing some of the questions of individual learning styles, and sharing the results can alert the group to the thinking behind decisions on the syllabus and language learning activities. In terms of tutor - learner relations, the maxim "You do things differently, not wrongly" is not a bad one to adopt. Even casual but sensitive discussion with the group at strategic points during the course (for example, after an activity has gone badly for some learners) can be enough to prevent learners feeling impatient or that they have failed. Self-and peer- evaluation techniques after an activity are also valuable if the emphasis is on confidence-building and successes as well as errors and shortcomings. This is not just based on a theory of "sugaring the pill" but builds up a degree of trust and empathy within a group and allows learners to feel relaxed enough to benefit from self, peer and tutor criticism.

The role of the tutor

In language-focus activities, such as the introduction of a grammar point, the tutor may be controlling the action, but it is more likely that much of the time the tutor's role will be that of a facilitator or friendly consultant in the background while the learners engage in either genuine interchange or discussion, or a simulation of the world outside.

The tutor is the expert about the target language, but this does not preclude some very useful discussion about language by the learners themselves. This incorporates best practice of mixed deductive and inductive teaching of language and usage. On trade union matters, the tutor is unlikely to be the 'expert'. However in the situation where the tutor is knowledgeable about trade union issues, there are good arguments for withholding information until fruitful discussion has taken place among the learners.

Tutor-confidence

However, feedback should be two-way. Where there is initial resistance to the chosen teaching method, the tutor should be confident of his or her own professional expertise and teaching methods which are known to be tried and tested. S/he should be explicit about the teaching aims wherever necessary, and expect a degree of co-operation in trying out "new" activities.



GROUP DYNAMICS

Pairwork

Pairwork activities sometimes have to be justified to language learners particularly in mixed-level groups where working with a less competent partner can cause frustration. It may be useful if the tutor makes the following points to the learners: firstly the target-language will often be encountered in international groups where the users of the target language are not native speakers; secondly, recent research seems to show that there is more production of language between partners of different levels, as a result of the increased effort made.

Criticisms often arise when the tutor uses pair-work automatically without taking care to ensure that students get the chance to work with different partners. A simple method is to give numbers to each half of a group (say, 1 to 5) and tell them to find their matching number.

If some learners feel that they do not receive tutor-correction in pairwork, it would seem wise to air views on the differences between fluency and accuracy practice. Learners will also see that the tutor circulates among the pairs, noting learner needs and errors for later discussion or language work.



Pairwork activities sometimes have to be justified to language learners

Getting the group to interact in the target language

Message-orientated communication rather than language-orientated communication is the basis of information-gap and opinion-gap activities. In the former, one of the learners has information which others do not; this may be genuine, or within a tutor-devised activity. In the latter, learners have different opinions on real-world issues or



activities devised by the tutor. Gaps can only be filled by the use of language, and these activities provide an opportunity for maximising production of the target language by the learner. Activities of this type include: interviews, problem-solving, discussions, role-plays and simulations.

Role-play and simulation

The regular use of role plays and simulations provide extended opportunities for language production, with clear parallels with the real world, while also allowing the tutor the opportunity for unobtrusive observation, which can valuably shape the language-focus in subsequent sessions. Feedback is essential, whether in the form of individual strengths and weaknesses noted on a slip of paper handed to the learner afterwards or in the form of a group discussion session.

Involving the learners in self and peer evaluation is also valuable. Filming or taping some interaction facilitates this kind of analysis on the part of both tutors and learners.

Group formation activities

It is unfortunately true that all of the above will only have a limited success if the group does not get on together. Time spent on facilitating group dynamics is essential. This can take the form of icebreaking and group consolidation activities (whether learner to learner or tutor to learner), which involve some sharing of information about each other. The tutor should occasionally encourage the sharing of some personal information, because this will increase the range of language used and it would be tiring and limiting if the learners were only asked to function in the target language while in their professional roles.



Time spent on facilitating group dynamics this is essential

[▶ Contents](#)

