EVOLUTION OF GROUP-DYNAMICS IN THE CLASSROOM IN THE LIGHT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

This essay is trying to demonstrate that evolution has touched even the field of classroom organisation and classroom activities ever since the controversial approach to teaching and learning (i.e, the communicative approach) has gained field. One of the immediate results was the learners' awareness of their fellows and of their position in a group with similar interests, that of achieving knowledge in a foreign language. The essay also presents features of communicative language teaching approach as well as group dynamics issues (stages of group development, advantages and disadvantages) and concludes by agreeing that evolution in any field meets risks and in our case, that of teaching and learning by means of group activities in the light of the communicative approach of the process, the risk is worthwhile.

Learning a foreign language has become a necessity in our times governed by the need to communicate and integrate in the larger family of joined European communities. Thus, all those directly or indirectly involved in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language (in our case, English) have been striving to succeed in achieving their goal. This process has not been an easy one to perform; it implied hard working, determination, failures, recoveries, discoveries, revolutions, in a word: evolution. Teachers and formatters have gone through the ordeal of trying all kinds of teaching approaches and methods in their quest to obtain the best results. Thus, the specialised literature mentions approaches like: the grammar translation method, the audio-lingual method, the silent way, suggestopedia, communicative language teaching, total physical response, the community language learning, a.o. All of these have their share of good as well as not so good aspects. Learners, in their turn, have been the subjects of just as many approaches but, probably the one which has proved to be among the 'happiest' cases, is the Communicative Language Teaching method, both from the point of view of the teachers as the learners.

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A new fashion: Communicative Language Teaching

The communicative approach could be considered the product of educators and linguists who had grown dissatisfied with the audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods of foreign language instruction. They felt that students were not learning enough realistic, whole language. Students did not know how to communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions; in brief, they were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied. Interest in and development of communicative-style teaching mushroomed in the 1970s; authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another became quite popular.

In the intervening years, the communicative approach has been adapted to the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels, and the underlying philosophy has spawned different teaching methods known under a variety of names, including notional-functional, teaching for proficiency, proficiency-based instruction, and communicative language teaching.

But what is communicative language teaching? Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audio-lingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. If the students' motivation is achieved, half of the success of the class is, actually, assured. Motivation is, indeed, a powerful tool in any activity in every day life therefore, trying to provide students with real life situations is considered a good technique.

Most present-day practitioners would probably like to think that their classes are 'communicative' in the widest sense of the word. Their lessons probably contain activities where learners communicate and where tasks are completed by means of interaction with other learners. To this end there will probably be considerable if not extensive use of pair, group and mingling activities, with the emphasis on completing the task successfully through communication with others rather than on the accurate use of form. During these activities the teacher’s role will be to facilitate and then to monitor, usually without interruption, and then to provide feedback on the success or otherwise of the communication and, possibly, on the linguistic performance of the learners in the form of post-activity error correction.

In terms of the organisation of the lesson, the classic present, practice and perform model, where careful input of a particular structure is typically followed by controlled, less-controlled and freer practice is likely to have been replaced by a more task-based approach, possibly on the lines of

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test, teach, test, where the learners are given a communicative task which is monitored by the teacher and then their language use while performing the task is fine-tuned by the teacher in a lesson stage which focuses on error correction or a particular form that is causing difficulties. This is typically followed by a further task-based stage, where the initial task is repeated or a similar task is performed, ideally with a greater degree of linguistic accuracy than during the first attempt.

Another feature will probably be that the traditional grammatical approach of starting the beginner's syllabus by presenting the present tense of the verb 'to be' will have been replaced by a more communicative focus, with basic introductions, requests and questions enabling learners to begin communicating in English from the very first lesson. It is probably fair to say that, as we look at the language classroom of 2000, there will probably be a certain degree from stepping back from the extremes of the totally communicative classroom, with its obsession about reducing teacher talking time to a minimum and maximising the opportunities for communication.

This type of approach tended to give the impression of a syllabus without direction and a sense of communication for communication's sake, producing the valid comment from at least one aggrieved learner: 'Groups, groups, groups. Why do I have to talk all the time to my fellow students. I can do this in the coffee-bar!' What we will probably find now is a more balanced approach with opportunities for structural input (including practice of language patterns). There will, however, almost certainly be an emphasis on more authentic contexts with example sentences being at the very least semi-authentic and potentially of communicative use rather than arbitrary examples of form with little or no communicative value. In today's classroom we will probably also see a lot of authentic listening and reading material being used and far fewer contrived texts designed to illustrate grammatical form or present items of vocabulary and with no attempt to communicate a meaningful message to the listener or reader. *Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the communicative approach will be that it has allowed teachers to incorporate motivating and purposeful communicative activities and principles into their teaching while simultaneously retaining the best elements of other methods and approaches rather than rejecting them wholesale.*

Margie S. Berns, an expert in the field of communicative language teaching, writes in explaining Firth's view that 'language is interaction; it is interpersonal activity and has a clear relationship with society. In this light, language study has to look at the use (function) of language in context, both its linguistic context (what is uttered before and after a given piece of discourse) and its social, or situational, context (who is speaking, what their social roles are, why they have come together to speak)' (Berns, 3-21).

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Group Dynamic

When discussing about Communicative Language Teaching, one shouldn't, therefore, forget the issue concerning the group and its dynamic, since communication outside the pattern of the group would have no support. The group is the entity which sustains the idea of communication, be it group formed by student(s)-student(s), or teacher-student(s). Along with the idea of the group come all the implications this has: stages in group formation, establishing norms, working in achieving the goal, discipline, product presentation, a.o. The group is, therefore, a living entity, a unity which needs time and skill in getting formed and actually functioning as such. Its dynamic depends upon a number of factors, most of them, rather subjective. This is why the evolution of group dynamics is a very delicate, yet, very important issue.

According to Gene Stanford (Stanford, 25) 'group dynamics examines the way people behave in groups and attempts to understand the factors that make the group more effective. It looks at different styles of leadership and patterns of influence, and the process by which decisions are made in a group, at the norms - that is, ideas of what is appropriate behaviour or appropriate procedures - in the group, at the pattern of communication in the group, and at factors such as openness and cohesiveness.' He also states what it takes for a group to be effective; 'the members understand and accept one another; communication is open; members take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour; members cooperate; processes for making decisions have been established; members are able to confront problems openly and resolve their conflicts constructively; thus, effective classroom groups are productive working units'.

Interest in the evolution of group dynamics in the classroom is reflected in the changing paradigm in education in general and in second language teaching in particular. The old paradigm is slowly giving way to the new one: (Richard, J.C., Renandya, W.A., 335)

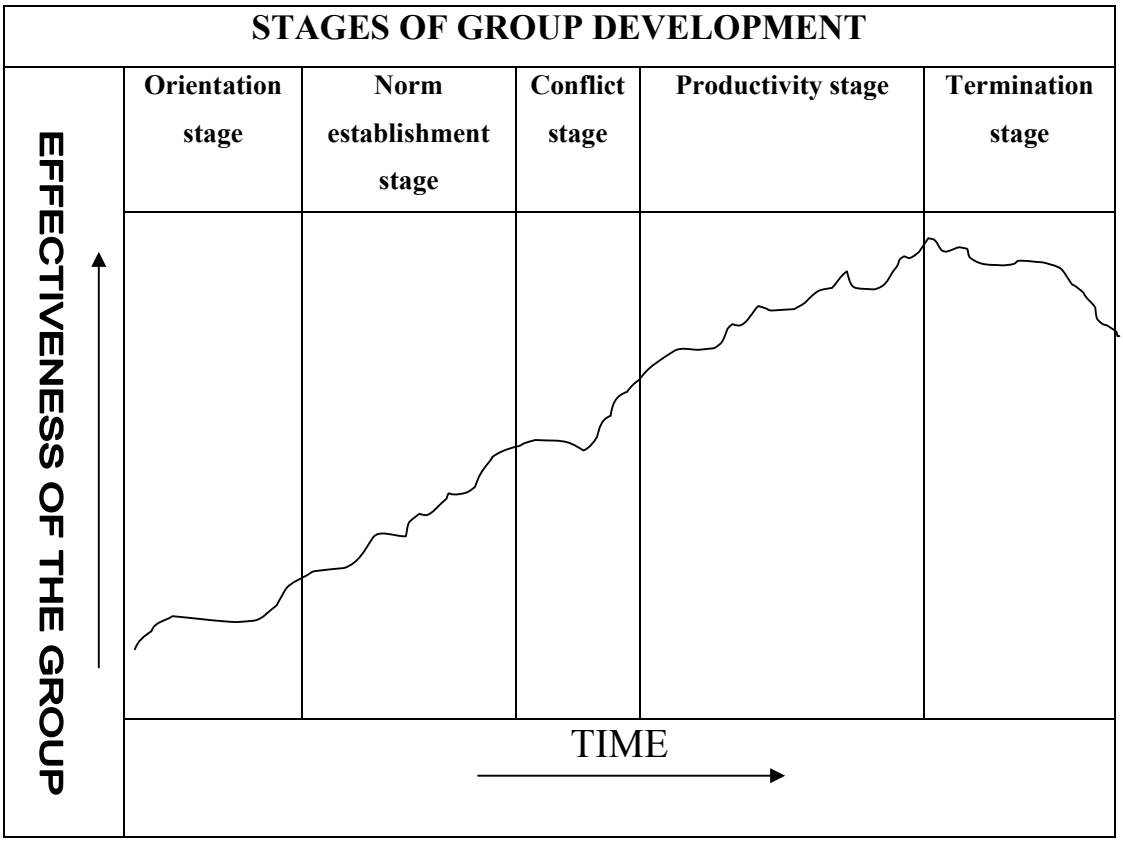
Old Paradigm	*New Paradigm*
1. focus on language	1. focus on communication
2. teacher-centered	2. learner-centered
3. isolated skills	3. integrated skills
4. emphasis on product	4. emphasis on process
5. one answer, one-way correctness	5. open-ended, multiple solutions
6. tests that test	6. tests that also teach

According to this table, there are notable and obvious differences between the two paradigms; one might even argue that one is everything the other is not. The focus in the case of the old paradigm is on the language and its accuracy, while the new paradigm focuses on the important issue of

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communication between the members of teaching-learning process, i.e. the students and the teacher. Yet, if we were to consider who of the two members of this process is actually in the 'spotlight', it is definitely not the teacher, but the student, whose needs have been placed first. The skills are no longer considered separately, since the new approach involves considering more than one, isolated skill at a time. On the other hand, it is no longer the process in achieving a product, but the product itself the one the new paradigm is interested in. The old paradigm dealt with single solutions to certain problems, while the new approach is into multiple, open solutions. Last, but not least, the old paradigm talks about tests that do exactly what they were designed to: i.e. test. But the new, modern paradigm is proud with the tests that do more than just test: they also teach, both the students, to learn from their mistakes and do better at the following tests and the teachers, to improve their abilities and, why not, design better ways of teaching and assessing.

Five are the stages of group development the author above mentioned takes into discussion:



Stage one: Orientation

This is the very first stage, when students get in touch (probably for the first time) with their new group colleagues and new teacher. They are swarmed with questions about how their colleagues and teacher might be, how they might treat him/her, will he/she have a lot of work to do, and so on.

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The teacher's role in this stage is to try to clear up some of these and other problems, to describe the students what they are expected to do in the class, involve them in certain activities that might help them get acquainted with one another.

Stage two: Norm Establishment

After the students have passed through the orientation stage, they need to establish certain rules, norms in order to make sure that activity develops smoothly. The norms are issued by the students with some input from the teacher, if necessary. Therefore, the students have to take *responsibility* for their actions, should contribute actively and seriously to group activity. They have to be *patient* and *responsive* to others fellow students, take turn in speaking and not interrupt the other when speaking. Since they are a group, they should *complete* not compete with one another. Decision-making in the group should be *consensual*. The students in a group should also confront and deal with possible problems together.

Stage three: Conflict

After the students have been grouped and established the rules that apply to their party, they start working together. Sometimes, or most of the times, due to different opinions, values, personalities, backgrounds, they might come to a point where conflict appears. It is very important that the teacher knows how to cope with this delicate issue. The teacher should make students understand their feelings and behaviour and explain them that conflict can be a positive force, since it is the precondition for change and growth. But, sometimes the conflict is the result of one or more students' 'rebellion' against the teacher authority, in their quest to gain independence. This might make the 'respectful' students (the ones who have always depended on the teacher's authority as a source of security) feel a little threatened. Therefore, the teacher should extract and use the positive elements of students' criticism and demonstrate that conflict could be constructive, thus reassuring the anxious students, as well. It is also of paramount importance for the teacher to have the finesse to solve the conflict in an unbiased manner.

Stage four: Productivity

Ideally, once the students have gone through the orientation, norm establishing and conflict stages successfully, they should be ready to start working, producing the tasks they have been grouped for in the first place. But, quite often, they may be more concerned about their interpersonal relationships rather than work together in order to complete their tasks. To prevent this from happening, or, at last, keep it under control, the teacher should have students involved in activities which do not leave room for off-the-subject discussion among them.

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Stanford (idem, 257) discusses about several such activities: *small group projects, short-term small group discussions, simulations, role-play, outside the classroom project.*

Small group projects: in this approach, students in groups/teams of from four to eight work on projects given by the teacher as part of a larger project, or on a project of their choice. Each group works either independently or under the direct supervision of the teacher. This activity could develop for days, even weeks, time used by the students to do research, discuss their findings and come up with a final report to be presented in front of the other colleagues.

Short-term small group discussions: these types of activities are probably the most commonly applied in our classes, since they imply dividing the class period in three: 'warm-up phase, in which the students are introduced to the day's work, an activity period in which they perform the task, and the integration period for drawing conclusion and examining implications' (idem, 259).

Simulations: 'Often, simply discussing an issue doesn't give the students sufficient insight into the way the people involved actually think and feel, especially if the students have not had much personal experience related to the topic. Simulations can give students a second-hand experience (the next best thing to direct experience) which will make their discussion of the topic more meaningful.' (idem, 259)

Role-play: is on good idea, being considered one of the most effective learning methods. It is a useful way to rehearse social skills and communication skills learned in the classroom. Students get to act certain issues out instead of just talk about them, they feel as if they really *are* the people involved. One might argue that role-play is closely related to simulation; this is not far from the truth, yet, the former offers the students freedom and flexibility to perform and develop the given situation the way they feel whereas the latter implies carefully structured situations.

Outside the classroom project: 'Students can be encouraged to undertake projects that get them involved in the world beyond the walls of the classroom. These projects might involve research into social problems through interviews, surveys and observation or they could focus on social action through publicising problems, influencing public opinions, writing letters, speaking to civic groups, etc. the important ingredient in this kind of project is that a group of students who share a common concern work together to accomplish their purpose.' (idem, 261)

Stage five: Termination

One thing is sure when it comes to discussing about a classroom group: it has a beginning and an end. The end of the semester or the end of the year makes this termination stage inevitable. Those groups which didn't quite form a group (i.e. 'team', 'family') will cope with this ending phase pretty easy, with relief or even indifference. But when it comes to the mature working groups, who have

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become emotionally and socially bonded, this termination stage might be perceived as an upsetting moment. Therefore, it is the teacher's task to help students cope with the separation problem, encouraging them to move on to new experiences.

After shortly describing the stages of group development, it is important to underline that even if they appear so, they do not have clear time delimitation; they overlap one another to a great extent. Sometimes, the members of the group feel to return to certain stages in order to clarify certain problems which appeared on the way.

Pair-work, group-work and *team-work* belong to what is generally called *group work*. Such organised, students, undergo, as shown above, what is also known as the *cooperative learning*. (Richards, J.C. and Renandya, W.A., 52) Cooperative learning implies more than just arranging students in groups and having them do something. Jacobs G.M. and Hall S. (idem., 52) state that 'Cooperative learning principles are tools which teachers use to encourage mutual helpfulness in the groups and the active participation of all members.' They have tried to offer an answer to what seem to be the most commonly asked questions concerning the group-work issue: (note: here, the pair-work, group-work and team-work have been treated together, with particular specifications where necessary)

Q 1. How big should groups be?
Q 2. How should groups be formed?
Q 3. When students are working in their groups, how can the teacher get the class's attention?
Q 4. What can be done if the noise level becomes too high?
Q 5. What if a student does not want to work in a group?
Q 6. What if some groups finish earlier than others?
Q 7. What if a few students are frequently absent?
Q 8. How long should groups stay together?
Q 9. How should groups be ended?
Q 10. What percentage of the time should cooperative learning be used?

A 1. When talking about a *pair* (i.e. a group of two students), the authors underline that the advantages might be that each member gets the chance to talk and nobody is left out. In the same time, few group management skills are required in such situation. On the other hand, *larger groups* are also encouraged since they 'provide more people for doing big tasks, they increase the variety of people in terms of skills, personalities, backgrounds, and so on and reduce the number of groups for the teacher to monitor.' (idem., 53)

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A 2. There are many ways in which groups could be formed: sometimes, it could be quite interesting to leave the choice of grouping to the students and see what they do; thus, the teacher might notice certain relationships that already exist among the members of the class. Some other times, the teacher could be the one who, using different modalities, chooses the members in a group: for instance: the technique by which each student gets a number: 1,2,3,4. and then all the 1s and the 2s, a.s.o. gather to form a group. Grouping them according to their interest in music, or to their eye-colour or even at random could prove to be quite interesting, even though, almost every time, at least one student will feel him/herself not belonging to that group.

A 3. From time to time, even after the groups have been formed and started their activity, the teacher might need to interrupt the students from their work; but how could this be done without the teacher having to shout louder to cover the implicit noise created by the students in their activities? The teacher could signal this by raising his/her hand. When students see this, they, too raise theirs, putting a temporary stop to their discussion and also alerting the others who haven't seen the teacher's raised hand. The authors mentioned above (idem, 54) refer to this as RSPA (Raise hand, Stop talking, Pass the signal to those who have not seen it, Attention to teacher). Some other teachers might use other techniques: flicking the lights on and off, blowing a whistle, snapping fingers.

A 4. In case the students have become very noisy due to their involvement in the activity, the teacher might need to use several techniques to reduce the noise level to the normal one. The teacher could place a red card on the desk of groups which are causing the noise; or he/she could appoint a 'noise monitor or quiet captain whose function is to urge the group to collaborate actively, yet quietly' (idem, 55)

A 5. Some of the students might feel themselves embarrassed due to their lower abilities to master and use the language; thus, they might prefer to stay out and not take part to the group activities. It is very important that the teacher explains the student(s) that talking with other students and taking part to such activities are also ways of learning and improving the language. The use of some games might be a good idea to attract such reluctant students. Experiences have shown that such students will, eventually, want to take part to the activities together with the other students.

A 6. If some of the groups have finished earlier than others, the teacher should check whether they have completed their task properly. If they have, they could compare results, or go and help other groups who haven't finished yet. Some other times, the teacher should prepare some 'sponge activities': these are 'short activities, related to the main task, that soak up the extra time between when the first and the last group finish' (idem, 56)

A 7. This risk appears when the group-work activities last for more than one class period. Group activities may give the students the feeling of belonging and another reason to come to school;

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students should be coached by the teacher to use the appropriate peer pressure to encourage the members who are frequently absent to come and complete their task. On the other hand, students in a group should learn to work together as a whole and solve such situations, if necessary, play two roles at once, or have other back up plans.

A 8. This really depends on the activity, on the goal. Normally, the amount of time a group should stay together is somewhere between: long enough for them to become a 'family' with all its implications but not too long to lead to boredom.

A 9. Every group activity has a purpose, a goal. Once it was achieved, the group can be ended. Anyway, it is important for the members of the group not to part abruptly, but only after having drawn the conclusions, after having discussed and analised the possible problems met while being together. If the group was together for a longer period of time, pictures could be taken or group products could be posted or published.

A 10. There is no such a percentage. Group work activities can and have to be mixed with traditional learning activities, in which students work by themselves, following the instructions offered by the teacher. Anyway, the students should be made aware about the advantages and the disadvantages of each type of learning. In order to find out about their feelings and opinions, feed-backs should be required.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Developing Groups

After having discussed about the stages of group development and answered some important questions concerning grouping, one should have a look over the *advantages and disadvantages* of developing such groups of learners.

One might argue that having students organise in groups (be it pairs, groups, teams) takes a lot of time and energy, both on the part of the teacher and on the students. The same party might doubt the necessity and efficiency of such an approach, wondering whether the students really need to work in groups since they socialise enough outside the classroom. Not to mention the noise and chaos working in a group might cause. From this point of view, yes, there are certain *disadvantages* to group work: noise, too much time involved, less control from the teacher, students discussing other than what they are supposed to, some students take the lead and do most of the talking, while others (shy, embarrassment, little knowledge in that field, a.o.) become simply spectators, possible quarrels and disagreement among the members of the group, the fixed position of the furniture in some classrooms can complicate the physical arrangements for group work, use of mother tongue when the teacher is involved with other groups, a.o.

On the other hand, if we consider the stages of group development, the role of the teacher, which is very important in keeping things under control, one has to admit that there are many

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advantages. The students learn to work as a team, they feel comfortable talking freely to their fellows without permanently being controlled and corrected by the teacher, thus, they will not feel threatened and embarrassed, they feel free to express their opinions and are proud to see they are accepted, they interact with their colleagues, they create bonds and social relationships, a positive affective climate is promoted, motivation is increased, self-confidence is build, co-operative language learning is favoured. This only adds to the success of the tasks they have to achieve, and if the teacher does do his job to make sure the students do not go off the track, the group work activity will be a success itself. This, of course, implies that the teacher is a good classroom manager.

Instead of a conclusion

We have seen how this process of evolution group dynamics in the classroom implies more 'players' and its success depends on each and everyone's implication. The path this process has gone so far has not been a smooth one all the way yet, the results show that all the efforts were worthwhile. Participants to the teaching and learning process (i.e. teachers and learners) have found revolutionary ways of dealing and coping with the learning material and have also discovered that teaching and learning a foreign language could be an interactive, thus easier to approach activity. As stated in the beginning, the communicative language teaching and learning method has proved to be one of the most suitable one in dealing with the novelty this situation implies. Thus, a new attitude towards the teaching and learning process appeared which has caused changes in the way of thinking, leading to an openness to revolutionary ideas in studying a foreign language. Of course, change implies risk but results so far show that these risks are worth to be taken.

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