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Developing Strong Group Dynamics in the ESL classroom

By Claire Ryan (Business English Instructor, Berlitz, Japan)

Working in pairs or groups is an essential element in the ESL classroom, which encourages students to practice English in an active way. However, it is not as simple as pairing students up and hoping the conversation flows smoothly. This is especially true in my experience of ESL classrooms in Ireland. English language instructors in Ireland often find themselves in a unique situation not experienced by their peers around the world – thanks to the diverse nationalities who come to Ireland to study English, very often the classroom group will be made up of learners from many different countries, cultures, backgrounds, and ages. This creates both opportunities and problems for instructors and adds some extra hurdles that must be overcome in order to create a successful group dynamic.

Educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman identified four stages that occur in groups of learners: Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing (Tuckman 1965). He argued that groups cycle through these phases multiple times as they learn to work well together. While some of these stages can be difficult for both students and instructors to work through, they are essential steps in the formation of good group dynamics. By examining what happens in each stage and understanding how it helps lead to a better working group, instructors can learn how to manage their classroom and their own actions to better suit the needs of learners.

In this article, I would like to give an overview of each stage, including how it may present in a classroom setting. I will also discuss my own experiences of these stages, both as an ESL instructor in Ireland teaching groups of mixed nationality students and as an EFL instructor in Japan teaching groups of Japanese nationals from diverse backgrounds. I will also discuss some techniques that helped in my attempts to overcome the problems in each stage and create a harmonious classroom environment where students could thrive.
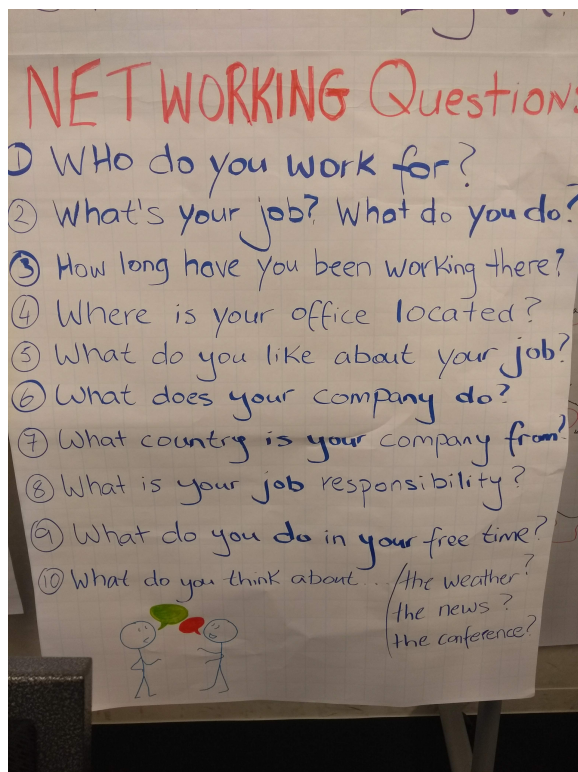
Phase One - Forming

This is the initial phase, as the group comes together for the first time. Students are nervous, both about meeting the instructor and meeting their fellow classmates. They don't know what they should expect from the class, or what their role in the group will be. This is noted by Dornyei and Murphy, who write of students on the first day of class, "they observe each other suspiciously, sizing up one another and trying to find a place in an unestablished and unstable hierarchy" (Dornyei & Murphy 2003).

The dynamic of this class group will likely be very different from their usual experiences; for example, a student who usually takes the role of leader in their work environment may find that other classmates challenge him or her for this role in the class group. The cultural background of students will have a big impact on this phase. Students who come from a more reserved culture, such as Japan, will often shy away from speaking and feel intimidated by students who are naturally more talkative and outgoing, such as those from Spain. This may result in these reserved students being afraid to speak even one word in the classroom. As the students are uncertain when trying to find their feet in this phase, the instructor must take charge and guide them in trying to find their place in the group. Instructors can do this by utilizing a number of techniques.

Manage learner expectations. Ensuring that students know what to expect from the class – and what is expected of them – is crucial in ensuring smooth group dynamics. The instructor must set out, from the very first lesson, what the lesson structure will look like, what classroom rules are in place, how the feedback process will work. These guidelines will allow students to feel comfortable with the class, as they will understand what to expect and how they should behave as part of the group.

Create a welcoming atmosphere. Allowing students to feel comfortable expressing their opinions is another key aspect of creating a cohesive group. Ice-breaker and self-introduction activities can help the students get to know each other and feel more comfortable speaking together. Every member of the class should feel that they are on equal footing and will not be treated any differently from the others. Encouragement from the instructor

Manage Learner Expectations

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can help students to take part actively in group activities without feeling shy or nervous. Calling on students by name will be essential at this point, as it gives each person a chance to participate equally. Managing the speaking time of more dominant students and giving the floor to the hesitant students will give everyone a clear picture of how they should behave in discussion activities.

The problem of who is the "leader" in the class is especially apparent when dealing with groups of different ages and backgrounds. For some cultures, the oldest person is in charge and should be shown the most respect. It can also cause problems in groups of employees taking lessons together.

Allow me to share an example from my own experience. I was teaching an intensive English course for members of a large company. The students were assigned to classes in groups of two, based on their ability levels. The groups changed each week – students chose a time that suited them and were matched according to class availability.

"When I felt they were both sufficiently prepared, I allowed them to take part in a guided role-play discussion with each other."

In one class I taught, the two students were a manager (older man) and a junior staff member (younger woman) from the same department. They had met before, but in a setting where he was her senior in a company where hierarchy was paramount. It was very difficult for her to shake off that dynamic and realise that they were equals in the classroom. She was afraid to answer questions, often deferring to him or erasing her correct answers to match his incorrect ones in listening exercises in order to allow him to "save face" – a cultural norm in Japan where people should never show up someone more senior than them. As the instructor, I had to quickly take steps to address this imbalance without being culturally insensitive.

Instead of throwing them into the deep end of role-play activities together – where I knew the female student would be too shy to produce any language – I instead had them practice with me first. I allowed the female student to go first, so that her responses wouldn't be clouded by anything she had heard from the other student. I then praised her for her efforts, before repeating the role play with the other student. When I felt they were both sufficiently prepared, I allowed them to take part in a guided role-play discussion with each other. This gave them a framework to use, so they could practice without feeling too much pressure. As they became more comfortable together, I encouraged them to move off script and add their own ideas to the discussion. By building the lesson up slowly and giving repeated practice time and praise, they were able to have a free and confident conversation without worrying about the relationship dynamic that existed outside the classroom.

Phase Two - Storming

This phase is a time of conflict. Once students have gotten over their initial uncertainty and found a voice in the class, they feel able to express themselves more openly. While this is desirable, it could result in potential power struggles, either between various students or between the student and teacher. Some students will want to be seen as a 'leader' - if two or more students want this role, they may become hostile when others are speaking, or become uncooperative in group activities. This can cause a breakdown in the positive atmosphere the instructor strived to create in the Forming phase, and must be dealt with carefully in order to restore harmony to the group.

First of all, instructors should try to roll with it to a certain extent - this is a normal part of group formation and should be expected. Don't take it personally and don't react with hostility when it happens. As noted by Schmuck & Schmuck (2001), "the teacher who is able to help influential students feel involved in the classroom will have an easier time influencing the entire group than a teacher who is in conflict with the high-power students".
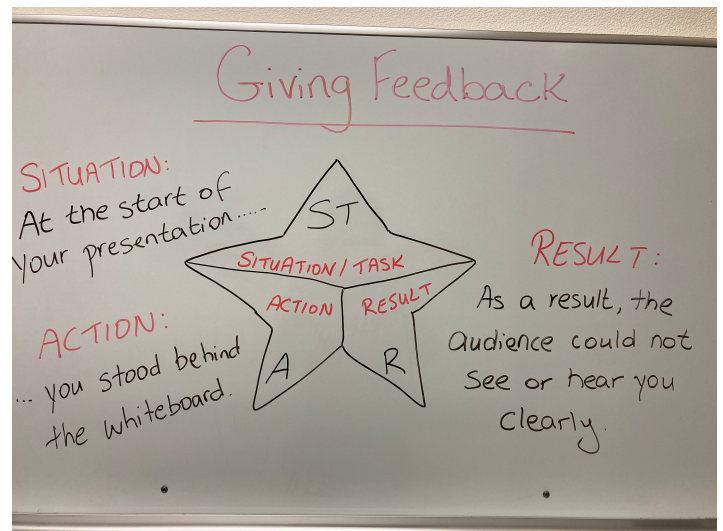
Instead, try to find some positive approaches that will encourage students to take the role they desire without alienating others. This can be done by alternating which students work together for group or pair work, allowing each person a chance to be a leader. Encourage students to work cooperatively, highlighting the importance of each person in achieving a common goal.

Phases Three and Four - Norming and Performing

If the group can successfully overcome their difficulties in phases one and two, then they are on the track for success. This progression is noted by Quy (2017), who says: "developing good group dynamics ... builds trust and acceptance among group members". When this trust has been established, the group will soon enter the final stages, norming and performing.

In these stages, the group has become well developed. The students have settled into a routine and know what is expected from them and others. Generally, the instructor can take a more hands-off approach as the students step up and take on leadership roles within the group.

In these stages, I have observed that students have learned each person's strengths and weaknesses and use this to their advantage when working on group projects. In a large group class, I set up an activity where some students were entrepreneurs and others were investors. Half of the students were assigned to small groups and were tasked with setting up companies and vying for investment from the other students. Immediately they began to take roles in their company that reflected each person's interests and talents, points that they had learned about each other during the previous stages of group formation. One student was assigned to draw the advertising poster for their product, because they had learned that she was good at art. Another was tasked with making the pitch to investors, because he had the best presentation skills. All of this happened as I stood back and monitored, with students taking total control over the project and working well together for the benefit of the group.

Giving Feedback

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One main task for instructors in these stages is to watch out for routines that may have a negative impact on learner outcomes and ensure that students do not fall into damaging habits. If negative behaviours do start to become apparent at this point, it may be necessary to re-establish guidelines to ensure a successful learning environment is maintained.

The process does not end here, however. Groups will cycle through these phases at different rates and at different times. Some phases will last longer than others, or may be revisited more often. A return to earlier stages does not mean that the group dynamic has broken down completely but is instead a natural and normal part of group work. The instructor should remain vigilant to the dynamics of the group and always keep students working towards successfully reaching the later stages.

Conclusion

As we have all undoubtedly experienced, the first day of a new group class will be rife with uncertainty and confusion. Groups don't come together immediately and the role of the instructor must be to influence and develop good group dynamics.
The challenge for ESL instructors in Ireland is to take students from varied backgrounds and cultures, and get them working together as a cohesive group, in an environment that promotes learning.
By being aware of the stages that groups will go through and what to expect in each stage, instructors can be prepared and ready to deal with any problems that arise, gaining experience that will be invaluable over the course of their teaching career.

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