

Current perspectives on the role of group dynamics in language teaching

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A volume from practitioners to practitioners

In social psychology the role of the group has long been researched and numerous studies highlight the importance of being part of a group in human life. We are social animals as Aronson (2008) puts it. This means that cooperation with other people is a central feature of all facets of everyday life: we live in families, form work communities, and very often learn in groups.

Current language teaching trends are rooted in the findings of social psychology regarding the evident need of humans to belong to various groups. Therefore, language teachers are encouraged to apply methods involving group work and pair work formats because it positively affects learners' cooperative skills and prosocial behaviour (M. Nádas, 2003); additionally, it also exerts beneficial influence on learning efficiency (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). In the light of these studies, the book *Dinamikus csoport, dinamikus tanulás* [Dynamic group, dynamic learning] touches upon a hot topic in language pedagogy, that is, the role of group dynamics in language learners' learning process. This volume is not only relevant because of its choice of topic but also because there is a lack of books written in Hungarian that aim to explore this field of research as well as to present the widest possible scope of the field within a single volume. Besides its up-to-date topic, the obvious novelty of the book lies in the editors' conscious effort to bring the topic closer to practical applications including both pedagogical and research oriented audiences. Moreover, the present work enumerates studies by authors of various professional backgrounds including practising teachers from secondary and tertiary education, fresh graduates, and researchers. This diversity of authors opens the door to publications from outside the traditional academic setting for which there is a clear demand (Révész, 2011). Although the diversity of authors might have suggested differences in language use, this book offers proof of the existence of a professional Hungarian linguistic common ground which reads well to all audiences. Although the book focuses predominantly on group dynamics in English teaching environments, it walks the reader through the issues of this field from theory through research to classroom practice.

Book content and implications for practice

The book consists of four chapters. It starts with a theoretical overview on the interrelationship of group dynamics and language learning. This chapter is followed by the second part delving into the role of group dynamics in language learners' motivation and

performance. The next section revolves around the functioning of different learner groups in various educational settings. The volume concludes with an article presenting hands-on approaches to the application of techniques promoting group dynamics in classroom settings.

The first chapter written by Csizér (pp.11–23) provides an overview of research fields and research methods that are involved in the subsequent studies. It provides a definition of learner group (Brown, 2000; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003) on which all the studies in the book can be based, which assists the comparability of the different participant samples. Besides this, Csizér briefly reviews the most relevant pieces of literature regarding the interrelationship of motivation and group dynamics (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei, 2001), cooperative learning (Bárdos, 2000), and group dynamics in language class settings (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Finally, the chapter elaborates on the possible research methods and their applicability in different research settings. This chapter offers a brief background to all the following studies, which facilitates the readers' understanding.

Chapter 2 entitled *A csoportdinamika hatása a nyelvtanulói motivációra és teljesítményre* [The effect of group dynamics on language learners' motivation and performance] contains six articles utilizing various types of research design: questionnaire studies, experiments, a case study, and an interview study. The multiple research methods applied in the articles ensure a broad perspective on the interrelationship of group dynamics and learners' motivation and performance. Besides, readers who are interested in planning and conducting their own research project can get an overview of the application of certain research methods in educational practice. Regarding the content of the articles, based on the results, it can be stated that a well-functioning group supports learners' motivation and performance.

Jánosházi and Csizér (pp.27–43) point out a strong correlation between motivated learning behaviour and learners' experience of success in the group and between the group and its leader. The importance of success in motivated learning behaviour is emphasised in Herendi and Fekete's (pp.44–60) article as well. Besides this, they found three other factors contributing to both adult and secondary school learners' motivated learning behaviour: active participation in group work, conscious use of English during group work, and the intention to find an opportunity to work in groups. Similar aspects of group dynamics are highlighted in Kivovics's (pp.61–86) sociometric study in which she examined how the classroom exercises promoting group dynamics assist group cohesiveness. She points out that these classroom exercises effectively enhance the formation of a cohesive group, which directly supports active participation, and constant English language use. Kivovics claims that in a well-functioning and cohesive group, learners are much more motivated and can develop their English language proficiency as well as the quality of their social relationships. Kivovics's results are in harmony with the findings of Tóth's (pp.114–140) experimental study with A2 level adult language learners. She states that even less proficient language learners can benefit from exercises promoting group dynamics. As Tóth highlights, these exercises created a more supportive and stress-free atmosphere, which eased the language learning process. Vukics's (pp.87–113) mixed method study provides both learners' and teachers' perspective on the most important group dynamics factors in enhancing motivation. Besides the novelty of the dual angle, the value of the study lies in the fact that it emphasises the importance of learners' opinion of the language learning group they belong and the level of cooperation among learners in motivated learning behaviour.

The articles in Chapter 3 entitled *A csoportdinamika jelentősége különböző osztálytermi helyzetekben* [The significance of group dynamics in various classroom situations] look into classroom situations in which either the participants represent a special population or the teaching methods in which participants are involved can be considered a novel way of enhancing learners' efficiency in language learning.

Vámos's (pp.163–186) study is based on a school-year-long participant observation in a group comprising 12-13-year-old dyslexic learners. The aim of the research was to improve the pedagogical practices and methods that are aimed to decrease the behavioural and psychological problems, and to develop the learners' social skills. Similarly to Tóth's (pp.114–140) study with adult learners, Vámos's work also underpins the importance of stress-free and supportive classroom atmosphere. Besides, Vámos also reports that dyslexic learners' self-confidence and performance can be increased by tailoring the learning requirements to their abilities and needs. Steiner (pp.187–214) attributes an important role to stress-free atmosphere too. She states that this is a basic condition for learners to become autonomous. In her article she describes a self-constructed pedagogical program for enhancing learner autonomy at primary schools. According to her reflections on the program, autonomy and group dynamics go hand-in-hand and these two factors promote self-evaluation skills and learning consciousness. Steiner argues that the learners benefited much from the program not only because they became more autonomous but also because they gained experience about actively cooperating with others and belonging to a group. The value lying in the feeling of belonging to a group is echoed by Szalay (pp.214–221) and Szesztay (pp.223–235). Szalay describes the well-functioning group as a possibility for university learners to add more value to their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, which she partly bases on the feedback gained from her students. She states that through active cooperation and other more intangible interpersonal processes, like the common experience, literature can enrich learners' personality with the ability to empathize with others. Looking at groups from another angle, Szesztay, demonstrates that many university students face difficulties when they need to perform or express their opinion in a group. She emphasizes that the teacher needs to sense the underlying emotional or cognitive processes of the individuals in the group besides applying various tasks in order to promote group dynamics.

Chapter 4 entitled *Osztálytermi tanulságok* [Conclusions for the classroom] consists of a single article with a hands-on attitude to group dynamics. Based on the conclusions of the previous chapters, Holló (pp.239–280) describes a wide range of classroom activities that merge the various aspects of group dynamics highlighted in the articles of the book. This part puts the findings of the previous research articles into classroom practice and at the same time assures the reader of the applicability of certain pedagogical methods promoting group dynamics while developing learners' language skills.

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