V International Forum on Teacher Education

The Problem of Raising Group Cohesiveness in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the problems of forming and developing group cohesiveness as an essential part of learning and teaching foreign languages. It raises an issue of phased group development in the process of learners' interaction in the EFL classes in Russian primary school. The research centres on findings intended to manifest the educational potential of group cohesiveness and to clarify the terms "group" and "collective" according to contemporary international educational standards. The insufficiency of studies on group cohesiveness in foreign language classrooms and the existing research results that emphasise the importance of group processes in language learning explain the relevance of this paper. As the methodological instruments name A.N. Lutoshkin's social climate circle and the method of emotive symbols were used. Group cohesiveness was analysed from the perspective of the pupils under study and the observers of the process. The research demonstrates the influence of group emotional state and level of cohesiveness on the effectiveness of interactive techniques in the EFL classes. The findings demonstrate the complex interaction between group development and educational results.

Key words: group/collective, group cohesiveness, EFL, ELT, primary school, interactive techniques

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Introduction

The study of interactive learning widespread in foreign language teaching as a part of the communicative approach and its effect upon groups has recently expanded. Extensive research is conducted to examine more closely some psycho-social aspects which include group cohesiveness, the nature of group functioning, motivation, group dynamics, group norms, etc. The studies have shown the benefits of positive group dynamics (Donato, 1988), an interconnection between intensive language settings and group cohesiveness (Hinger, 2006), the relation of group work dynamics with task motivation and language production (Poupore, 2016). It has also been manifested that cohesive groups are characterised by high motivational intensity, which results in better language learning achievements, since the members feel more relaxed communicating with peers (Senior, 1997; Dehoek, 2012). An additional benefit of group cohesiveness is its influence on learners' positive evaluation of their group (Clement, 1994).

Although studies on group cohesiveness conducted in foreign language classrooms have shown promise, they still remain rather scant compared to the research on the topic in other contexts (e.g. business, therapy, sport) (Mullen, Copper, 1994). This fact points to the relevance of this study and thus motivates exploration of the relationship between the use of interactive learning techniques in ELT and group cohesiveness. The relevance of the study is also supported by the correlation with the research in this sphere (Dörnyei, Murphey, 2003; Hadfield, 1992) that highlights the importance of group processes in language learning. For example, Dörnyei and Murphey has investigated the interconnection between group dynamics and motivation in second language (L2) classroom contexts. They focused on the development of group cohesiveness and how groups facilitate L2 learning through cooperative tasks. Dörnyei and Murphy has also revealed ways in which practical implications of group dynamics are applied in the EFL classroom.

Most studies that have investigated interactive learning in conjunction with group processes concentrated mostly on its motivational and educational advantages, only on group or pair work (Brown, 2007; Kevin Yee, 2015). In contrast, this study places an emphasis upon a variety of interactive techniques and forms of interaction and their impact on a particular group-related process – cohesiveness. The investigation was longitudinal and examined the interaction of primary school pupils over time in Russia.

In this paper we begin with the discussion of the core terms related to our study, mainly: group, collective and interactive learning. This is followed by the description of the methods used and the process of data collection. Then we turn our attention to the results illustrated by a social climate circle and the dynamics of pupils' emotional states. Possible limitations related to the findings are also mentioned in that section. The conclusion considers the interpretations and implications of the findings for the EFL classroom.

Theoretical background

Group and collective

In order to avoid ambiguity, it is vital to make a distinction between "group" and "collective". According to Donato, "group" is a "loosely-knit aggregate of individuals" while "the collective comes to exist as a result of both the value the members place on their activity and the value-laden activity in which they are engaged". An ability to coordinate the actions of each member in a cooperative effort to solve problems appears to be one of the defining features of collective (Donato, 1988: 290). Collectives, unlike other groups, provide learners with the support and strategic processes that eventually become available for individual use (Donato, 1988: 108-109). Since motives generate activity, collectives can be defined and

identified to the extent that individual members share the same motive for activity. Conversely, in loosely knit groups, their lack of common motives for engaging in joint activity contributes to their inability to operate on a collective level. Thus, the failure to share common motives results in a configuration of individuals engaging in separate and distinct activities (Donato, 1988: 147).

The fact that this research focuses particularly on group cohesiveness also calls for the definition of the term. According to Dörnyei and Murphey, group cohesiveness is "the closeness and 'we feeling' of a group" (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003: 62). It is "the strength of the relationship linking the members to one another and to the group itself" (Forsyth, 1990: 10). Group cohesiveness implies a strong connection between the members who share ideas, take part in group-related activities and work together easily (Dörnyei, Murphey, 2003: 62). Members of a cohesive group eagerly communicate, and cooperate with each other, and give support to one another (Dörnyei, 1997; Dörnyei, Murphey, 2003). Group cohesiveness consists of three components: interpersonal attraction, commitment to task and group pride (Mullen, Copper, 1994: 220). Associating with other group members, having the same goal and the feeling of superiority in being a member of the group form the sense of belonging.

However, in this paper we also apply the definitions of "collective" and "group cohesiveness" as a vital feature of a highly developed collective given by Soviet scientists. The reason is that their interpretation of these terms is relatively wide and the idea of collectivism has been most effectively developed during the USSR period. Understanding the concept "collective" is possible only through an appeal to its history.

From 1920s up to 1990s, the idea of collectivism in the Russian pedagogy was fully and pervasively elaborated. Due to the abrupt transition from communism to democracy in 1991 Russian educational system underwent fundamental alterations. The core of the reformation in the education paradigm was a change-over from the Soviet idea of forming the personality of a child in accordance with the standard, defined by the society, to the humanistic approach that implies creating a favorable environment for the full and harmonious development of a child, his/her self-realization in the status of a law-abiding citizen. Through the change of the paradigm, the concept of collectivism in pedagogy has been criticised severely. The reasons are that collective depresses personality, subdues people to the opinions of the majority, promotes conformity while this is unacceptable and inconsistent with the ideas of democracy, individual freedom, publicity etc.

The point is that practical application of the term "collective" in its trivial interpretation indeed leads a teacher to an authoritative position when a collective is considered to be a form of a simpler organization of children's activity. In this case, public opinion functions as an instrument of repression, which influences negatively the personality of a child. Nonetheless, from a scientific viewpoint, such social group cannot be defined as "collective".

An eminent scientist, who regarded "collective" as a central concept in his pedagogy, was A.S. Makarenko, a Soviet social pedagogue and an educational theorist. A.S. Makarenko defines "collective" as a complex of organized personalities with shared responsibilities and collective's committees, which help to unite the members through not only setting common aims but also achieving them (Makarenko, 1990). A.S. Makarenko formulates the law of collective's functioning and the principles of collective's development, which provide a basis for the procedure of phased collective's formation.

A.S. Makarenko's ideas were supported and evolved by his follower V.A. Sukhomlynsky who expanded the term of collective. According to V.A. Sukhomlynsky, collective is a complex interaction, mutual "contagion" of interests, an exchange of spiritual acquisitions and knowledge that create

"intellectual background", contribute to children's progress, provoke an ambition to learn more, thus helping pupils in their main activity – learning. V.A. Sukhomlynsky insisted that "collective" is not a faceless mass but a variety of individualities. The inner world of a collective and a personality is created due to their mutual influence on one another (Sukhomlynsky, 2016). A.N. Lutoshkin, Soviet psychologist and pedagogue, used a specific method to observe and assess pupils' group development. Based on the definitions of "collective" given by A.S. Makarenko and V.A. Sukhomlynsky, an ability for self-development is the principal characteristic of collective. A.N. Lutoshkin expressed connections and relationships between these substructures with the help of integrative characteristics, which are as follows:

•   group cohesiveness – a relatively steady characteristic where more «socialized» development indicators play a leading role;

•   social climate – collective's social willingness to act;

•   activity – dynamic characteristic of collective's development (Lutoshkin, 1988).

A.N. Lutoshkin distinguishes five degrees of children's group cohesiveness, which bear "metaphoric" names: "sand", "soft clay", "blinking lighthouse", "scarlet sails" and "flaming torch". There are no clear-cut boundaries between them. Every other degree exists in the framework of the previous one. Therefore, we can say that these degrees reflect the process of group cohesiveness development. "Sand" exists formally; nothing unites its members each of whom is all by him/herself. In "soft clay", members begin taking efforts to come together. "Blinking lighthouse" activists manage to unite group members who start working together, helping each other, though this is based only on the activists' enthusiasm. "Scarlet sails" is a cohesive group but its members are not always ready to overcome difficulties and acknowledge their mistakes. Defining "flaming torch" as the highest degree of group cohesiveness he considers the following criteria of it:

•   collective's success in any activity;

•   friendly relationships among children;

•   unity of outlook;

•   shared responsibilities;

•   activity of all members;

•   desire to participate in socially significant affairs;

•   public opinion (Lutoshkin, 1978).

Following the A.N. Lutoshkin's concept, we could determine the "flaming torch" to be a collective due to the level of development of its cohesiveness.

More than that, it is important to refer to the parametric concept of collective suggested by L.I. Umansky, a specialist in the sphere of social and pedagogical psychology. He represented group psychology through the following substructures: social substructure, personal substructure, psychosocial qualities, social value and content of collective's activity (Umansky et al., 1971). Later A.V. Petrovsky, a Russian psychologist who made a great contribution to the theory and history of psychology, social and personality psychology, regarded the group as a sum of interactional and communicative acts of a predominately emotional nature (Petrovsky 1983: 6). From this perspective, relationships within a group are considered as direct links joining participants, who are subject to external influence. Groups, which operate at the activity-based level of functioning, are called "collectives" – human interactions and interrelations mediated by the socially valuable and personally significant content of joint activity (Petrovsky, 1983: 14). The way members construct their activity together defines a collective. Collectively constructed activity takes on personal meaning for each member. The activity has personal meaning if the

context is sufficiently open to allow the members of the group to reshape it to conform to their personal goals (Petrovsky, 1985: 78).

Thus, the idea of group, collective and group cohesiveness is reflected in the given concept of collective based on both, pedagogical and psychological approaches of foreign and Russian scientists. Taking into consideration modern international educational standards, we should aim at life skills-based education associated with relevant and engaging learning content. It means that interactive and participatory learning and teaching should enable all learners to acquire knowledge and to develop skills and attitudes, which allow them to cope with a wide range of intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts and challenges within the collective.

Interactive learning

It is equally important to clarify the term "interactive learning". The concept of interactive learning is defined as the essence of the communicative approach itself, which emphasises the importance of interaction since human beings use language to "negotiate" meaning. According to this approach, a teacher and students serve as equal subjects of educational process that is conducted in the context of their continuous interaction (Brown, 2007: 42-43). Interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas resulting in a reciprocal effect on people. (Brown, 2007: 165). From the very beginning language classes should be interactive. That implies live communication, which ensures the formation of a child's personality, his or her personal fulfilment and effective participation in the community.

Given the above, it is particularly worth mentioning the features of interactive classes. Brown D.H. finds that "interactive classes will most likely to be found:

•   doing a significant amount of pair and group work;

•   receiving authentic language input in real-world contexts;

•   producing language for genuine, meaningful communication;

•   performing classroom tasks that prepare them for actual language use "out there";

•   practicing oral communication through the give and take and spontaneity of actual conversations;

•   writing to and for real audiences, not contrived ones" (Brown, 2007: 48).

Thus, interactive classes involve a substantial amount of interpersonal communication "with all the diversity of acts" (Gilmutdinova, 2016: 2139). In the context of ESL classes, interaction is related to:

a.   types of language tasks – certain kinds of L2 tasks encourage interaction – simulations, games, role-plays, drama and the use of electronic media;

b.   willingness to communicate – a student's intention to interact with others in the target language, given the chance to do so;

c.   learning styles – the general approaches students use to learn a new subject or tackle a new problem;

d.   group dynamics (Oxford, 1997: 449).

As far as group dynamics is concerned, the group richer in resources than any single individual affects members' attitudes, such as confidence and satisfaction, so that these attitudes influence interaction. Groups provide guidelines for behavior within the group and standards for self-evaluation and help learners maintain energy (Oxford, 1997: 451).

Interactive learning thereupon encourages natural acquisition of a foreign language based on the psychology of human relationships and the experience gained in common activities and cooperation of a

teacher and learners. It is with this in mind that a variety of interactive techniques were applied in this research. We adhered to the techniques suggested by H. Douglas Brown and Kevin Yee. The English classes conducted for this study were based for the most part on the following tasks suggested and described in detail by H.D. Brown: games, role-play, projects, interview, brainstorming and jigsaw.

H.D. Brown is mostly concentrated on group work tasks intended to sustain interaction at the lesson. Meanwhile, Kevin Yee, the Director of the Academy of Teaching and Learning Excellence at the University of South Florida, Ph.D., collecting innovative approaches for highly effective teaching, curates a list of interactive techniques which have already reached the number of 228 (Yee, 2015). Some of the techniques were also applied for the research.

The use of these techniques was intended to not only avoid the pupils' passivity and make the learning process effective but more importantly, to intensify children's relationships, improve their interpersonal skills and promote their initiatives to take collective decisions.

Methodology

General overview of the methods

The methodological approach of the research involved the following aspects: discussions for planning the English lessons, their observation and group cohesiveness measuring instruments. The instruments included Lutoshkin's social climate circle and his method of emotive symbols, which provided the basis for the design of the dynamics of group's emotional states. Group cohesiveness was analysed through the eyes of the pupils of the group under study and the observers of the process.

The method of emotive symbols was applied to evaluate the degree of group cohesiveness and to define the nature of inner relationships between the group members. The method implies group self-assessment. The criteria for the assessment are integral emotionally conventional symbols reflecting peculiarities of interaction and relations in the group. The choice of symbols is determined by children's psychological characteristics, their inclination for emotional perception of the reality. An ability to visualize the group through the symbols and correlate the group with them constitutes an important part of the procedure.

Observation allows designing a social climate cloud based on the social climate circle. The circle represents an interrelation between the scale of group's emotional states and activity. There are two axes: Y stands for activity in the range of +3 to -3, X stands for emotional states in the range of +3 to -3. According to Lutoshkin, there are 5 zones of social climate to distinguish:

I.   the zone of high emotional pulse beat;
II.   the zone of general discontent and anxiety;
III.   the zone of a good, healthy tone;
IV.   the zone of positive spirit;
V.   the zone of pessimism and depression.

To create a social climate cloud, a researcher needs to define the emotional state of a group on the horizontal axis and group's activity on the vertical axis. After a period of observation all the extreme ends are connected, thus forming a social climate cloud (Lutoshkin, 1988).

Additionally, the social climate circle provided data for the graph of the dynamics of group's emotional states. The graph demonstrates group's emotional pulse whose rhythm and amplitude reveal the emotional unity of the group and cohesiveness of its members.

Observation and group self-assessment appeared to be the sources of information for further

investigation with the help of group cohesiveness measuring instruments. Method of emotive symbols and the social climate circle facilitated data arrangement while the graph and the social climate cloud contributed to the consequent conclusions.

Research site and participants

The context for the research was a series of English lessons devised and conducted by the representatives of Kazan Federal university in Comprehensive Secondary School №39 with Advanced Study of English as a part of a student teaching program. The duration of the program was one school term that included 34 lessons. The aim was to improve participants' group cohesiveness by means of interactive learning in the ESL classes. The lessons took place four times a week in the early afternoon for 45-minute periods.

The group consisted of 14 Russian learners, that is: six female and eight male pupils. The age ranged from 9 to 10. The pupils had been learning the English language for three years already. The teacher was a female fourth year student of Kazan Federal University. The university's associate professors, who also observed the lessons to collect the research data, approved her lesson plans.

Results

Method of emotive symbols

To measure the quality of inner relationships among the pupils, the method of emotive symbols was applied twice: at the beginning of the study to define the initial degree of group cohesiveness and at the end of the term to find out whether interactive learning influenced the group. The essence of the method is group self-assessment made in the form of a discussion during which its participants decide how cohesive their group is and to what degree it can develop. The discussion begins with the introductory words of a teacher who explains the aims of the discussion and its importance for the class. Then children familiarise themselves with the emotive symbols and correlate their group with one of them giving arguments in favor of their opinions and predicting the prospects of their group's development.

It must be noted that the group self-assessment was carried out outside the English lessons so as not to impede the educational process. The discussions were lively and intense. Emotive symbols facilitated breaking psychological barriers, formulating thoughts and arguments. The analysis of the data collected after the first discussion showed that children could not choose one particular degree insisting that they were somewhere between "blinking lighthouse" and "scarlet sails" featuring characteristics of both. 2 pupils supposed that their class belonged to the category "soft clay" since, in their view, the class was relatively cohesive due to the teachers' efforts rather than their own. As far as the prospects of the group development were concerned, the children had no doubt that their class could reach the degree of "flaming torch" though some of them believed it would take time.

The second discussion was held after the series of English lessons. The majority of the pupils were convinced that they managed to reach the degree of "scarlet sails". 3 children said that their class remained at the same stage of development. 2 pupils, who previously characterized their group as "soft clay", admitted improvements in the relationships among their classmates and opted for "blinking lighthouse". In the process of discussion the teacher enquired whether the English lessons promoted changes in their class. Games, role-play and projects were agreed to be most effective in provoking the most intense interaction and collective initiative among the pupils. The children also remarked that the lessons were in great contrast to the ones they had the previous year. The teacher who had conducted their

English classes mostly used teacher-centered approach, thus avoiding natural interaction in the educational process.

Despite the subjectivity of the method of emotive symbols, it enabled the researchers to determine the degree of children's cohesiveness, their appreciation for the class and to find out how comfortable the learning environment for the pupils was. The findings demonstrate positive impact of interactive learning on social relations within the group.

Social climate and emotional pulse

The social climate cloud demonstrates the "mood" of the group with the help of 5 zones. According to Lutoshkin, the zones of high emotional pulse beat (I) and general discontent (II) are the most promising for groups compared to the zones of a good, healthy tone (III) and positive spirit (IV). Nonetheless, this does not mean that zones III and IV impede group development. They bear a specific function: emotional decline is the ground for the forthcoming emotional resonance with subsequent full group activity. Thus all zones have an impact on group development, though to a different extent (Lutoshkin, 1988).

The study provided insight into the social climate of the group reflected in the resulting cloud. As can be seen in figure 1, Zones I and III gained a dominant position, thus the following inference was drawn: the main characteristics of the atmosphere at the lessons were good mood, enthusiasm, initiative and cordial relations. However, high activity of the children sometimes led to overexcitement, extreme emotional responses and short attention span. Periods of emotional resonance were followed by periods of balanced states with a minor emotional fluctuation.
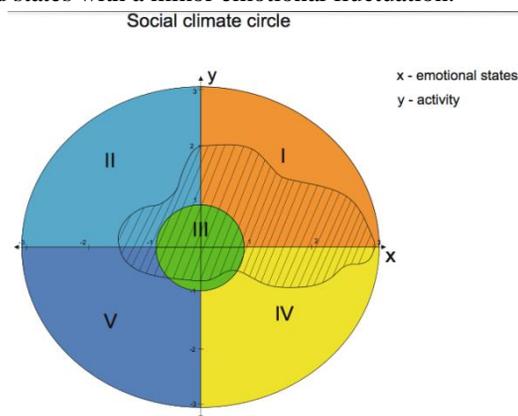
Figure 1: Social climate circle

In addition, the social climate cloud allows verifying the dynamics of group's emotional states. Group development is always accompanied by a particular emotional rhythm, which appears only due to the direct contact between children. Every group has an individual emotional cycle. Contrary to non-cohesive groups with a weak emotional pulse, cohesive ones, especially collectives, have a normal vivid rhythm with wide amplitude of emotional fluctuations (Lutoshkin, 1988).

The graph of the dynamics of group's emotional states (Figure 2) based on our findings defines the relation between group cohesiveness and the use of interactive techniques at the English lessons. The horizontal axis stands for the dates of the lessons (September-October 2016); the vertical axis stands for the emotional states of the group (from -3 to +3).
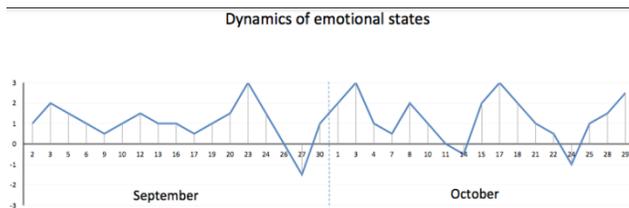
Figure 2: Dynamics of emotional states

During the first 10 lessons the amplitude of emotional fluctuations was relatively low demonstrating lack of emotional unity and cohesiveness among the participants. Then the rhythm gradually normalized and the amplitude of fluctuations increased. Emotional responses reached their peak thrice (23/09/16, 3/10/16, 17/10/16). The minimal value ever reached during the period under study was -1.5 thus reflecting the predominance of good moods in the group.

The social climate cloud and dynamics of emotional states provide most compelling evidence that interactive learning influences group cohesiveness positively and has a potential of developing a group into a collective in the long run. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that interactive learning may not be the only factor affecting group cohesiveness. Our findings admit the possibility that other factors could have an impact on group cohesiveness while these factors were not to be teased out.

Limitations

Although the study provides the experimental confirmation of the correlation between interactive learning and social processes in the group, it has some limitations. One limitation is that the context of the research was culturally specific and the participants belonged to a particular age group. Moreover, the number of the pupils was rather small. In relation to the use of group cohesiveness measuring instruments, it is important to remember that the study was run on the basis of self-report estimates and the researchers' observations and evaluations which thus imply the subjectivity of the process. In order to strengthen the gathered results, it would be of considerable interest to re-run the study observing more groups with the participants of different age. In addition, one ought to reiterate that the research bore the insular nature excluding possible complementary factors that could be a subject for future studies.

Conclusion

Phased group development implies qualitative changes in social climate and interpersonal relations of its members. This process characterized by group's emotional pulse creates the phenomenon of emotional unity, a prerequisite of a highly cohesive group – collective (Lutoshkin, 1988). The present study centered on the potential of interactive learning for achieving group cohesiveness in the English language classroom. The objectives were fulfilled through a longitudinal research in primary school settings over the period of one term. The findings point to a significantly higher degree of group cohesiveness reached due to the use of interactive techniques. The reason is that interactive learning provides direct contacts among children that enable them to diagnose subconsciously moods of each other and experience similar feelings.

Admittedly, emotional pulse is an indicator of the group's state and the efficiency of the teacher's activity. Emotional "arrhythmia" is a sign of distress. Thus, the prolonged presence of the states of overexcitement leads to a downturn in an individual's control over his or her own behavior, breakdowns in the relationships and short attention span. Emotional overload may also evolve into apathy when children

lose interest in collaborative tasks and become passive at the lessons. In contrast, periods of emotional starvation are characterized by a drive for new impressions, joyful experiences. Under such circumstances, a teacher can manipulate group's activity potentials with the help of interactive techniques choosing an appropriate one for a certain situation.

One of the principal aims of a teacher is a competent analysis of a social climate through the observation of children's activities, their communication, relationships and acts. A teacher also needs to observe the emotional pendulum of the class. Manipulating it the teacher regulates group's emotional life and facilitates its development (Lutoshkin, 1988). However, a collective, as Makarenko defines it, is a social living organism and its pulse is affected by a number of factors all of which the teacher is, obviously, not able to consider.

In view of the findings that confirmed the hypothesis of socio-affective potential of interactive learning in relation to collective, it is to be hoped that the study will take researchers one step forward along the path of penetrating into the nature of social processes in children's groups influenced by educational environment. Although the scope of the investigation is limited for generalization, the results suggest subjects and hypothesis for further investigations in this field.

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