1.2 Initial emotions in class

Think about it first

Imagine you are going to start learning a new language and the first class begins in just a few minutes at a new school. You don't know your classmates or your teacher. How do you feel and what are you thinking?

Let's start at the very beginning: the first lesson. Because we teachers have had so many 'first lessons', it is easy to forget how stressful this time might be for learners. It is comparable to walking into a party when you hardly know anyone there. This is how a Hungarian university student recalled in an interview how she first felt in a language course:

At the beginning, when I didn't know the group, I was always nervous – when nobody knows the others yet and doesn't even dare to approach and start getting to know them. Everybody is alone and so very shy; you don't know what you can joke about and what you can say to the others without offending them; you don't even know if they are good people or bad ones . . . It's all so uncertain. You don't know how other people's minds work.

(Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998:110–111)

This account is consistent with the research reports on how members of any newly formed group feel (McCollom 1990). Indeed, if we think about it, it is easy to understand why the process of group formation is so difficult for many learners. Students must deal with others whom they hardly know, and they are uncertain about whether they will like them or, more importantly, whether they will be liked by them. They observe each other suspiciously, sizing up one another and trying to find a place in an unestablished and unstable hierarchy. They are on guard, carefully monitoring their behaviour to avoid any embarrassing lapses of social poise. They try to present ideal images to one another, while hiding any signs of weakness. Those who lack sufficient social skills often find this process very demanding and frustrating. But even for socially adept people finding an identity in the group is no easy task. The 'fusion with the group' requires redefining themselves and constructing identities as group members rather than separate individuals – synchronising their behaviour with that of others by restricting it to some extent without relinquishing their uniqueness as autonomous human beings.

At the same time, learners also have doubts of a more academic nature. They are uncertain about how much they will benefit from the

classes and they do not know what working in the group will entail and whether they will be able to cope with the requirements. Learners keep comparing themselves to others, many of whom appear to be more competent and proficient. Joachim Appel, a language teacher turned language student, had such thoughts as he listed his fears (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001:110):

> *My fears: being called on to say something, mistakes, corrections, irony, ridicule. I keep comparing myself to the others. Even more important for my well-being than I thought: comprehension of what is said in class.*

Students are also striving to get used to the teacher's personality and style, and working out which behaviours are acceptable or desirable to the teacher. And, of course, all these complex processes are happening simultaneously while learners are also expected to do certain language tasks using the target language with others. A very stressful situation indeed!

The most common unpleasant feelings that many learners experience the first time they are in a new group are:

- general anxiety;
- uncertainty about being accepted;
- uncertainty about their own competence;
- general lack of confidence;
- inferiority;
- restricted identity and freedom;
- awkwardness;
- anxiety about using the L2;
- anxiety about not knowing what to do (comprehending).

Although the list is long, indicating that there is usually considerable emotional loading 'in the air', this may not be obvious to the onlooker, as on the surface the first language classes tend to run smoothly and harmoniously. In their search for approval and acceptance, learners are usually on their best behaviour and the social interaction between them often resembles polite 'cocktail party talk' (Yalom 1995). This is, however, no idle period in the group's life: scholars are in a general agreement that underneath the surface much structuring and internal organisation occurs, and within a very short time the group establishes a social structure – peer relations, status hierarchy, role and norm systems – that will prevail for a long time (cf. Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998; Forsyth 1999; Shaw 1981). It is up to the teachers how well they can utilise this initial smooth period to lay down the foundation of healthy future group development.

Questionnaire 1

How students feel in the first few lessons of a new class group

Thank you for filling this form out. You will learn about the group results in a few days.

*Please put an 'X' in the slot on the continuum which best describes how you **typically** feel in the first few lessons spent in a **new** class group (**not** this class).*

relaxed ___:___:___:___:___:___ nervous

confident ___:___:___:___:___:___ shy

sociable ___:___:___:___:___:___ withdrawn

willing to use the L2 ___:___:___:___:___:___ reluctant to use the L2

Now try and think back: how much has this class helped you to feel more . . .

relaxed?...

....

confident? ....

....

sociable? ....

....

willing to use the L2? ....

....

Is there anything you would suggest that we do to make the time

spent in class more enjoyable and useful? ....

....

Questionnaire 1 offers a quick way of taking the 'emotional temperature' of the students in the forming period. The initial items are formulated in a way that they refer to general feelings rather than feelings towards the particular situation the learners are in – this way it may be easier for them to produce honest responses – and relating the general to their current experiences is a good conversation starter.

What about you, the teacher?

So far we have only mentioned that the beginning period is stressful for the learners. However, teachers are also members of the group and very often they also have anxieties of their own. You may be new to the school or may never have taught the particular L2 level before. You may be unfamiliar with the textbook or the type of course to be taught. You may be inexperienced or simply nervous in the company of new people. Even seasoned teachers often have 'stage fright', particularly during the group formation stage.

Indeed, from the point of view of emotional orientation, many teachers are not unlike the other members in their class groups. A great deal of the psychological processes underlying group formation apply to teachers as well. For this reason, it may be particularly important for you at this stage to take part in the classroom events as an 'ordinary' group member by joining – as much as is feasible – some of the ice-breaking activities and, in a reciprocal fashion, sharing some personal information about yourself with the students. Naturally, in your position as group leader and knowledge source, you also have unique tasks and concerns; these are discussed in Chapter 6 in more detail.

> *Reflection*
>
> Ask other teachers how much and what kind of information about themselves they initially share with their students. How do you feel when you hear personal information from a teacher or speaker?

1.3 Intermember relationships

> *Clearly explained . . .*
>
> 'The initial event in group interaction, the establishment of a relationship between two or more persons, is often referred to as *group formation*. It is evident, however, that the formation of a group is a continuous process. That is, the formation of the initial

Group cohesiveness is obviously a generally positive feature of a class but it is *not* synonymous with a blissful climate and unqualified comfort. Yalom (1995) points out that although cohesive groups may show greater acceptance, intimacy and understanding, they also allow greater expressions of conflict. Indeed, flare-ups are often tolerated in cohesive groups (perhaps because the group can afford to have them) as long as they are processed in a constructive way rather than leading to sustained hostility.

4.3 Group cohesiveness and group productivity/ effectiveness

A cohesive group has a more pleasant atmosphere than a non-cohesive class, but cohesiveness is not just about feeling good. Past research has consistently revealed a positive relationship between group cohesiveness and performance (cf. Ehrman and Dörnyei 1998). This is not surprising: in a cohesive group there is an obligation to the group, members feel a moral responsibility to contribute to group success, and the group's goal-oriented norms have a strong influence on the individual. The likelihood of 'social loafing' and 'free-riding' (i.e. doing very little actual work while still reaping the benefits of the team's performance) decreases in cohesive groups. Furthermore, members of cohesive groups actively support each other, which further increases productivity.

> *Indeed . . .*
> 'When what we are doing and who we are doing it with matter enough to us, we will work harder for our groups than we will ever do on our own.'   (Rupert Brown 2000:192)

We would like to draw attention to one crucial point in the previous paragraph: the importance of 'goal-oriented norms'. Cohesiveness does not automatically guarantee heightened productivity but only in cases when the existing group norms are *supportive* of production. In groups which are very close but are not interested in the 'official' purpose of the class we can have a situation whereby the group very effectively *refuses* to learn (and follows what have been called 'runaway norms'). And, given that cohesive groups have a firm structure and are therefore much more resistant to change than non-cohesive ones, if a cohesive group has anti-production norms, the teacher has a real problem. Thus, strangely enough, with regard to anti-production norms a group with *low* cohesiveness is better news for the teacher than a highly cohesive

one, as students in the former are potentially more amenable to the teacher's influence (Schmuck and Schmuck 2001). We will come back to the possible downsides of cohesiveness later in this chapter (in section 4.5).

4.4 Promoting cohesiveness

Our discussion so far has hopefully made a convincing case for cohesiveness being a positive and sought-after feature of any learner group in general and language learner groups in particular. The question, then, is whether it is possible to cultivate it specifically. The good news is that there are a number of factors and conditions that considerably increase group cohesiveness, and many of these factors are at least partly under the teacher's control. Let us look at these factors and techniques one by one.

Well said . . .

'Despite the importance of individual friendship patterns and group cohesiveness, some teachers still maintain that they are employed primarily to teach content and that they should not be concerned about students' liking for each other or for the emotional closeness of the student group. We think such a view is shortsighted and naïve. It oversimplifies the social-psychological realities of teaching and ignores the psychodynamics that are integrally a part of most academic learning.'

(Richard Schmuck and Patricia Schmuck 2001:114)

Promoting acceptance amongst the students

Because 'interpersonal attraction' is one of the three main constituents of group cohesiveness, all the techniques that were discussed in Chapter 1 to promote intermember acceptance increase cohesiveness at the same time. These techniques included:

- learning about each other;
- promoting 'proximity' (physical distance), 'contact' and 'interaction' among the students;
- encouraging student cooperation;
- generating rewarding group experiences and organising extracurricular activities;

- coping with 'joint hardship' and 'common threats' together and participating in 'intergroup competition';
- modelling friendly and supportive behaviour by the teacher.

These factors, of course, can be combined to good effect. One highly popular cohesion-building activity that is used in many work places, the *outdoor experience programme*, is a good example of this (Levi 2001). In this activity, group members are presented with a series of challenges that they must deal with as a team. For example, they might have to cross a river using ropes, climb a mountain wall or do whitewater rafting. Such challenging activities certainly create proximity, contact and interaction; they require intensive cooperation; they are extra-curricular tasks and achieving them generates a rewarding group experience; furthermore, they qualify for 'joint hardship' and often involve some kind of intergroup competition. No wonder these outings are amongst the leaders' first choices when thinking of something that will bring people together.

Amount of time spent together and shared group history

We often find in relationships between two people that *the amount of time* the parties have known each other is a powerful factor to solidify and stabilise the relations. This is the same with groups: the 'Remember when we . . .' nostalgia usually acts as a strong glue bonding the group members together.

Group legend

A further important factor fostering cohesiveness is *group legends*. Jill Hadfield (1992) points out that successful groups often create a kind of 'group mythology', which includes giving the group a name and inventing special group characteristics (e.g. features of dress) in order to enhance the feeling of 'groupness'. Group members may also be encouraged to establish group rituals, create a semi-official group chronicle, prepare 'group objects' and symbols (such as flags or coats of arms) and find or create appropriate group mottoes and logos.

> **The class picture**
>
> Many students and teachers take pictures of the group at the end of their term together. We suggest doing it at the beginning of the course and giving copies to everyone for several reasons. It allows students to see their classmates out of class and helps them to

remember their names (it can even be an in-class activity when they are first handed out, 'Who is the guy with the red shirt next to the girl with a ponytail?'). Thus, it helps form a group. Ask them to paste the picture in the front of a notebook or textbook. Doing this is basically saying, 'You, and this group, are the course!' and lets them see each other, literally, more often.

Public commitment

Public commitment to the group also strengthens a sense of belonging, a fact that is well known, for example, to politicians and revolutionaries. Group agreements and contracts as to the rules are a kind of public commitment. Wearing school colours or T-shirts are another way of doing this.

Class newsletters for public commitment

Putting students' comments anonymously into class newsletters allows teachers to provide voices of commitment for all the class to consider and identify with. Tim included the following student comments in a class newsletter after spring break 2002, 'To tell the truth I really missed my friends here and I'm glad to see that they are still healthy and friendly like last semester.' Others wrote, 'It's the first time for me to speak so much English in class . . . Maybe it's because I had a good partner' and 'My partner is a hard-working student and a very responsible partner. She supported me to achieve 100% English today'.

Difficult admission

Another way to increase the cohesiveness of a group is to make admission into the group difficult. This is partly why exclusive club membership is usually valued very highly, and the same principle is intuitively acted upon in the various initiation ceremonies for societies, teams or military groups. Levine and Moreland (1998) report on research that has found that coal-mining crews, for example, use ritualised initiation ceremonies, in which newcomers are subjected to degrading and frightening experiences. These ceremonies serve several functions, such as testing how newcomers will respond to the dangers of coal mining, convincing newcomers that their safety depends on fellow miners and that the group has the means to punish nonconformity, and – last but not least – promoting a sense of solidarity within the group.

Investing in the group

It has been found that when members spend a considerable amount of time and effort contributing to the group goals, this will increase their commitment towards these goals and towards the group in general. In other words, psychological membership develops faster after some personal involvement in acts of actual membership, especially if publicly acknowledged. Therefore, eliciting some significant *investment* (e.g. completing a major project) early in the group's life may work towards group cohesiveness. The significant investment described in the following student newsletter comment concerns extensive reading:

> *It's incredible that most of the people are going to achieve their goals of extensive reading! Wow . . . That is such a great job. Through reading newsletters, I can see others' determination and strong will to expand their learning clearly. I also tell myself to keep up with them and I think this is a challenge for me to make my own world larger.*

Defining the group against another

Emphasising the discrimination between 'us' and 'them' is a powerful but obviously dangerous aspect of cohesiveness. It is amazing, for example, how effectively the rivalry between classes (e.g. in sports tournaments) can unite people within each class. There is a delicate balance to achieve here: while we would be very strongly against stirring up emotions against an outgroup in order to strengthen ingroup ties, it might be OK to occasionally allow students to reflect on how special their class and the time they spend together might be, relative to other groups. Note, for example, the following student newsletter quote:

> *In last week's Newsletter, I found that classmates usually share [about] our class with their friends in other schools. It's great. I did that before, [and] my friend told me that he wants to exchange classes with me. One of the reasons is that I can read newsletters as pleasure reading . . .*

4.5 Is there a possible downside to cohesiveness?

So far we have mainly talked about the bright side of cohesiveness. But is there a hidden dark side? It depends on our perspective: cohesiveness is usually positive from the relational point of view, but strong peer