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978-0-521-52971-6 - Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom

Zoltan Dornyei and Tim Murphey

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*and*  
*Tim Murphey*



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## Preface: How we came to write this book

Why would a Hungarian living in Britain and an American living in the Far East – both practising language teacher-researchers – decide to write a book together? And why on ‘group dynamics’ of all topics? Here are our personal accounts:

### Zoltán

As a practising language teacher I often felt that the field of psychology had a lot to offer me on how to teach better. This is why when I decided to do postgraduate work in the area, I selected a psychological topic, the role of motivation in foreign language learning. During my studies I spent a lot of time in libraries trying to trace down various literature leads and references that I came across in my reading. One such lead suggested that student motivation was sometimes influenced by the learner group – something every student knows who has worried about getting along with his or her new peers. Before long, I realised that groups did much more than just ‘pull down’ or ‘up’ a learner. They have a life of their own and – to my great surprise – this life had been the subject of a whole subdiscipline within the social sciences called *group dynamics*. My next surprise came when I found out that this vigorous and, from an educational point of view, extremely relevant subdiscipline was virtually unknown in the second language (L2) field, so I quickly added a chapter to my dissertation describing its basic principles.

Then I got along with my life, focusing mainly on motivation research, but group dynamics was always in the back of my mind as one of the potentially most promising areas to explore; I even wrote a few smaller articles on it (Dörnyei 1990; Dörnyei and Gajdáty 1989a, 1989b). In the early 1990s, I met a wonderful person, Angi Malderez, who came to work in Hungary at my university. As it turned out, she had also been hooked by group dynamics and had even started to write a book on it with a friend, Jill Hadfield, some years back. Although life



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in the end took them to different parts of the world and it was Jill who completed the book alone (Hadfield 1992), Angi, just like me, became a group enthusiast. We decided to pool our experiences and produced a review paper, which, to our dismay, was at first misunderstood by most journal reviewers. It appeared that they simply did not see the point in looking at group dynamics, often mistaking ‘group dynamics’ for ‘group work’ and referring us to Long and Porter’s well-known 1985 paper on the usefulness of student interaction for language acquisition.

I was about to give up when one day, out of the blue, I received a letter from Earl Stevick who had been one of the reviewers of our manuscript and who was upset that it had been rejected. He encouraged us to keep trying, and this encouragement – coupled with the subtle change in the zeitgeist in the field (with psychological approaches gaining prominence) – finally brought results: Angi and I succeeded in publishing not one but two overviews of the field (Dörnyei and Malderez 1997, 1999), and a summary of group dynamics and co-operative learning (Dörnyei 1997) was also accepted in a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal*, edited by Martha Nyikos and Rebecca Oxford (1997). To top it off, an American colleague, Madeline Ehrman, and I decided to write a theoretical summary of group dynamics and group psychology, which the American publisher Sage contracted straight away (Ehrman & Dörnyei 1998).

Thus, by the end of the 1990s there were two books out on group dynamics in the L2 field: Jill Hadfield’s (1992) very practical guide and Ehrman & Dörnyei’s (1998) highly theoretical work. What was missing was something in between: a book promoting group dynamics that would contain a more elaborate rationale and overview than the Hadfield book (which, apart from short introductions, only offers classroom activities in a ‘recipe book format’) but would be more accessible and relevant to classroom practitioners than the Ehrman-Dörnyei monograph. So I was on the lookout to find a fellow enthusiast who would be happy to join this project – after all, the best way to write about groups is surely in a team!

I have known Tim for a long time and I always thought that he was one of the most creative applied linguists, constantly coming up with original and highly colourful ideas. He also has the rare gift of being able to combine an interest in some of the most theoretical issues of the field and a passion for actual classroom teaching. One day, after I had already moved from Hungary to Britain, I was reading Tim’s entertaining and thought-provoking book, *Language Hungry! An introduction to language learning fun and self-esteem* (Murphey 1998a), and it suddenly clicked: Tim would be the ideal companion for the group project. And before long, we were on the way.

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Groups, teams and communities have often excited me with their potential for greater learning, amazed me with their increased creativity, and sometimes disappointed me with their failure to communicate and come together. For the first seven years of my career at the University of Florida's English Language Institute I taught diverse groups of international students (Asians, Arabs, Latin Americans, and Europeans), followed by eight years teaching and doing my PhD research on music and song in language education in Neuchatel, Switzerland. As a grad student, I partially supported myself by teaching private lessons and wrote *Teaching One to One* (1991), which looks closely at building rapport with others. During this period, I also worked for 15 summers as a language and sports teacher to international children from six to seventeen years of age in the Swiss Alps, forming groups in and out of the classroom. Then came 11 years at a Japanese university and a year and a half in Taiwan before returning to Japan in 2003. (Don't add all those up!) In every environment, with whatever the mix of cultures, I have found that explicitly attending to group-forming processes and stages has paid off in more peaceful classrooms and improved learning.

As pleasurable as some of my own classes have been, I still want to understand better how to consistently bring people together, excite them with the greater possibilities of cohesive teams, and navigate the inevitable ups and downs of group life. I see threads of this in my own writing about friends (Murphey 1998b), near peer role models (Murphey 1998c; Murphey and Arao 2001), and critical collaborative autonomy (Murphey and Jacobs 2000). While in Switzerland doing my PhD, I lived in a community of students who ardently discussed and debated practically everything. I was introduced to, and enacted, the Vygotskian idea that learning appears first in social interaction, between minds, and that messages are co-constructed by participants. About 15 years later, another group exemplified this process for me even more dramatically: Mark Clarke's 'doctoral lab' at the University of Colorado, Denver. Composed of about a dozen 'as diverse as you've ever seen' highly social thinkers who delighted in exploring ideas systemically, they welcomed me openly for three months when I was on sabbatical in 1999 and showed me the essentials of a high-achieving group: food, fun, friendliness, flexibility and ferocious philosophising with a purpose!

As I began to work on this project with Zoltán in 2001, I was changing jobs from Nanzan University in Japan to Yuan Ze University in Taiwan, saying goodbye to several groups and wondering how I was going to fit in with new faculty, students and cultures. I was a bit

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anxious about leaving the 'known' and learning a bit of Chinese, and at the same time also excited. Now, as we are finishing this book, I am planning my return to Japan in April 2003 to Dokkyo University, and again saying goodbye to groups that I have become very attached to and again feeling the anxiety and excitement that comes with joining new groups. Thus, writing this book at this moment in my life has been doubly rewarding because I have been able to use what we are writing about even more deeply as I am travelling between cultures, countries and institutions. In fact, I believe that because of this book, I have recently been able to have some of the most powerfully cohesive groups I have ever had.

While much of the early research in group dynamics was Western in origin and often in business contexts, I and my graduate students (junior and senior high school teachers) have found group dynamics extremely relevant in our Asian educational environments (Murphey 2003; Ozawa 2002). My energetic MA graduate school class in Taiwan read this book in draft form and daringly tried out suggestions in their own language classes. While, stereotypically, Asia is known for its cohesive groups, we found that actually studying how groups form and perform could take us beyond superficial social groups and help us construct more high performing teams. More recently, I have shared this information in training workshops in Syria and received similarly positive reactions.

I had read several of Zoltán's articles and books before I actually met him on a trip to Budapest back in the early 1990s. Since then we have met at numerous conferences, always interested in each other's research. It has been exciting to work on this book with him. He has a contagious enthusiasm for his research and teaching, and is an easy person to immediately like. Over a delicious breakfast at a very old train station halfway between the East and West in February 2001, we decided this would be a wonderful book to write together. And it has been!