



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**FEATURES OF GROUP COHESION
IN COOPERATIVE BASE GROUPS
IN AN ESL CLASS**

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FEATURES OF GROUP COHESION
IN COOPERATIVE BASE GROUPS
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By

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DEDICATION

To my Heavenly Father who takes delight in me



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Faculty : Educational Studies

The first objective of this study was to investigate if there was cohesiveness in the relationships among base group members, and if there was, to identify descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion. The identified features contribute significantly to theory building on group cohesion. The second objective was to formulate an organising scheme which classifies the descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion into different categories and sub-categories. This is a helpful framework for future qualitative data analysis on group cohesion.

This heuristic research was worked into a regular ESL class for one semester. The researcher was also the class teacher. Seventeen first semester UPM undergraduates enrolled in a level three English proficiency course were the



subjects of the study. The students were divided into four heterogeneous base groups.

The main instrument for data collection was the students' journals containing their written observations of their base groups. The journal entries were analysed inductively to identify descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion, and to formulate an organising scheme. The organising scheme was validated and revised a couple of times before it arrived at its final form. The reliability of the formulated scheme and interpretation of the cohesive features was established by computing the degree of correspondence between the raters' categorisations with the researcher's; the reliability was found to be at .87 and .91 respectively. The questionnaire was used as a secondary instrument to verify the cohesive features identified from the journals.

It is found that there was cohesiveness in the relationships among base group members. The cohesive features observed can be classified into four main categories: emotional bonding, efficient team work, member satisfaction, and conflict interactions. The interplay of these features motivated group members to work co-operatively together and to be committed in helping one another learn. This indicates that developing cohesive relationships among students by putting them in base groups is an effective strategy to motivate students to work together effectively. The findings of this study have several implications on the structuring of Cooperative Learning groups for greater effectiveness, and for the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

CIRI-CIRI KOHESIF KUMPULAN ASAS DALAM SATU KELAS
PEMBELAJARAN BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

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Kajian ini mempunyai dua objektif. Pertama, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sama ada terdapat hubungan kohesif antara ahli-ahli kumpulan asas, dan jika ada, mengenalpasti ciri-ciri diskriptif-interpretif kumpulan yang kohesif. Dapatan kajian ini dapat membantu dalam pembentukan teori mengenai kumpulan kohesif. Kedua, ia juga bertujuan membentuk satu skema organisasi yang mengklasifikasikan ciri-ciri deskriptif-interpretif bagi kategori dan sub-kategori kumpulan kohesif. Ini dapat membantu dalam penganalisan data kualitatif kajian-kajian lain mengenai kumpulan kohesif.

Kajian heuristik ini dijalankan selama satu semester di dalam kelas pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua yang dikendalikan sendiri oleh pengkaji. Subjek kajian terdiri daripada tujuh belas orang pelajar semester pertama



UPM yang mengikuti kursus kemahiran bahasa Inggeris tahap tiga. Subjek kajian dibahagikan kepada empat kumpulan asas yang heterogenus.

Instrumen utama pengumpulan data ialah jurnal pelajar yang mengandungi catatan pemerhatian mereka terhadap kumpulan asas masing-masing. Jurnal-jurnal ini dianalisis secara induktif untuk mengenalpasti ciri-ciri deskriptif-interpretif kumpulan kohesif, dan untuk membentuk satu skema organisasi. Skema organisasi ini disah dan disemak semula sebanyak dua kali sebelum mencapai bentuk akhirnya. Kemudian, skema ini dan ciri-ciri kohesif yang diperoleh disahkan dengan mengira darjah kesepadanan antara pengkategorian rater dan pengkaji; kebolehpercayaan adalah pada tahap .87 dan .97 masing-masing. Borang soalselidik diguna sebagai instrumen kedua untuk mengesahkan ciri-ciri kohesif yang dikenalpasti dari jurnal-jurnal pelajar.

Kajian ini mendapati wujud hubungan kohesif antara ahli-ahli kumpulan asas. Ciri-ciri kohesif yang diperlihatkan boleh diklasifikasikan kepada empat kategori: jalinan emosi, kerja kumpulan yang cekap, kepuasan ahli, dan interaksi konflik. Hubungkait ciri-ciri ini memotivasikan ahli-ahli kumpulan untuk bekerjasama dan bertekad membantu satu sama lain untuk belajar. Ini menunjukkan bahawa membina hubungan kohesif antara pelajar-pelajar dengan meletakkan mereka ke dalam kumpulan asas adalah strategi yang berkesan untuk memotivasi pelajar-pelajar bekerjasama dengan berkesannya. Dapatan kajian ini mempunyai beberapa implikasi terhadap penstrukturan kumpulan pembelajaran koperatif yang lebih berkesan, dan untuk pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua dan bahasa asing.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Research in the area of learning English as a Second Language (ESL) has shown that the problem of student participation in the ESL classroom is acute (Tsui, 1995; Kealy & Witmer, 1991). Such reticence in classroom participation is due to several possible factors: low English proficiency, students' lack of confidence in their language proficiency, and students' fear of making mistakes and being laughed at (Tsui, 1995; Cohen & Norst, 1989). Thus, two challenges facing ESL teachers in maximising language learning opportunities are getting ESL learners to be involved in their learning, and providing a classroom atmosphere that is both conducive and effective for language learning.

Since it is not possible to provide optimal language experiences for all students at once, such dilemma, according to High (1994), can be reduced by putting students into groups. One of the most common suggestions proposed for providing a conducive classroom atmosphere for language learning is to get



learners to participate in some forms of support group (e.g. Pica et al., 1996; Fassinger, 1995; Tsui, 1995). Learners working in groups were found to display greater motivation, more initiative, and less anxiety regarding their learning (Pica et al., 1996). Indeed, the benefits of group work is well documented, and current theory and research in second language acquisition point to the importance of peer interaction in groups as group work addresses the learners' affective concerns, and increases the amount of student interaction that helps learners to obtain what Krashen (1989) terms as "optimal input" i.e. input which is likely to lead to further language acquisition (McGuire, 1992; Young, 1991; Long & Porter, 1985; Gaies, 1983).

In the last decade, ESL/EFL teachers have become more interested in applying the principles and techniques of Cooperative Learning in getting students to work effectively in groups (Jacobs & Hall, 1994). Perhaps they have come to realise that simply putting students together in groups to discuss materials with each other, to help one another, or to share materials among group members may not result in actual co-operation and participation which result in learning (Holt et al., 1992; Johnson et al., 1991). What is needed is a structure that promotes interaction and strategies for improving relationships, without which, according to Holt et al. (1992), students remain detached from one another, and thus, are not able to benefit from the resources their peers represent. A Cooperative Learning group is more effective compared to group work of any sort precisely because Cooperative Learning provides group work with a structured format by incorporating five

essential elements: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interactions, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (Johnson et al., 1992). Second/foreign language learning theorists confirm that Cooperative Learning brings several advantages to the ESL/EFL classrooms such as increased student talk, more varied talk, more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation, negotiation of meaning, and increased amount of comprehensible input (Jacobs & Hall, 1994).

The efficacy of Cooperative Learning to improve academic achievement, teach social skills and build classroom community has been confirmed by numerous research studies conducted under carefully controlled situations with high internal validity either in the laboratory or field experimental studies, or in field quasi-experimental or correlational studies in real classrooms for a prolonged period of time (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). According to Johnson & Johnson (1994), research on Cooperative Learning has a validity and a generalizability rarely found in the educational literature. Research studies on Cooperative Learning have been carried out by researchers with markedly different orientations in different settings, times and countries, using samples that varied in SES, age, gender, nationality and cultural background, and involving a wide variety of tasks, as well as employing different ways of structuring co-operation and measures of the dependent variables. Thus, they feel that Cooperative Learning can be used with some confidence at every grade level, in every subject area, and with any task.

Literature on Cooperative Learning in the late 80s and 90s seems to have moved on from justifying the benefits of Cooperative Learning for the classroom to considering various issues related to the fine-tuning of Cooperative Learning conditions for better effectiveness. Many different strategies are employed to maximise the full potentials of Cooperative Learning groups, and group reward seems to be the most common. However, the effects of using group rewards have also generated much academic controversy.

Those who believe in the use of group rewards strongly believe that group rewards based on the individual achievement of each group member is essential in motivating students to work together and to be serious in helping one another. Slavin (1991a, 1991b, 1990, 1989/90, 1984), for example, claims that active peer discussion, explanation and help are substantially higher under conditions in which group rewards are used compared to conditions in which co-operativeness is encouraged but no group rewards are given. Those who are against the use of group rewards question the validity of such a claim. Kohn (1994, 1993a, 1993b, 1991a, 1991b), for instance, holds strongly that group rewards have a backlash effect on learning in the long run. As such, they (e.g. Sapon-Shevin & Schniedewind, 1994, 1989/90; Kohn, 1993a, 1990; Cohen, 1992, 1986; Schaps & Lewis, 1991) believe that there are other alternatives to group rewards that should be considered and these include interesting and challenging curriculum, student autonomy in the classroom, and cohesive relationships among group members.

Statement of the Problem

Developing cohesive relationships among group members is stressed by subscribers of the social interdependence theory. Hartup (1992) believes that friendships are unique contexts for the transmission of information from one student to another. Johnson & Johnson (1994) further support this view by stating that the degree of cohesiveness that exists among group members has a profound effect on the quality of group work. They feel that positive feelings group members have towards the group and other members of the group such as liking each other, wanting to help each other succeed, and being committed to each other's well-being may become strong factors in motivating them to work together and be serious in helping one another.

Related to this issue of developing cohesive relationships among group members is the need to keep group membership stable for a considerable length of time. Holt et al. (1992) emphasise the need for a fairly stable interaction pattern among group members if group interaction is to bring about language, academic and social growth. This view is shared by Jacobs & Hall (1994) who believe that keeping groups together for fairly long periods gives group members an opportunity to become comfortable with one another, allows them to form a cohesive group which bonds them, and gives them a chance to learn how to overcome difficulties they have in working together. They feel that long term participation in a group

ensures that individual students will have peers who are concerned about their success in school

In structuring group work, three broad categories of Cooperative Learning strategies have been suggested, namely, Informal Cooperative Learning group, Formal Cooperative Learning group and Cooperative Base group (Johnson et al, 1991) Of these three, Holt et al (1992) think that participation in Cooperative Base group (or base group), which is a long-term group with stable group membership, enables group cohesion Since studies have found that student involvement in some forms of support group brings about a conducive atmosphere for language learning, perhaps base groups could be the answer for the ESL classroom As group members remain in the same group over a long period of time, cohesive relationships among group members may be developed Consequently, when group members become friends, there may be more group participation in the form of peer discussion and explanation, and more help rendered to each other which result in language acquisition This is supported by Johnson & Johnson (1994) who believe that the caring and committed relationships built within a base group are essential for motivating long-term efforts to achieve, and for cognitive development Moreover, in view of the controversy surrounding the use of group rewards, the strategy of developing cohesive relationships among group members using base groups may be an effective alternative in motivating students of the same group to work together and to be serious in helping one another

Moving on more specifically to the Malaysian ESL scene, measures of language achievement, or more precisely, language testing, is usually on an individual basis. In addition, contact hours for learning English in schools is about 4 hours a week in an academic year, and in most institutions of higher learning, it is between 3-4 hours a week in a semester. In other words, the ESL learning situation is one whereby assessment of language proficiency is individualistic and the relationship among students is rather fluid due to the minimal number of contact hours for learning English. So, when students are put in groups to work together, the question that arises is how motivated they are to work co-operatively and to help one another since there is no group rewards to motivate them to take their group work seriously, and relationships among group members may not be close.

Thus, it was the intention of this study to investigate whether developing cohesive relationships among students by putting them in base groups which stay together for a period of time, would result in group cohesion which in turn can create optimal learning conditions for language learning. This investigation is based largely on the fact that participation in base groups has been found to enable group cohesion to be developed (Holt et al., 1992), and group cohesion is considered to be a reflection of the closeness in relationships among group members. It is assumed that when there is group cohesion, group members are motivated to work co-operatively, and are serious in helping one another (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Hartup, 1992). When that happens, there may be quality in interactions among group members which subsequently leads to language

acquisition (McGuire, 1992; Kealy & Witmer, 1991; Young, 1991; Long & Porter, 1985).

Objectives of the Study

Taking into consideration the ESL teaching and learning conditions at institutions of higher learning (individual assessment of language proficiency and the rather fluid relationships among students due to minimal contact hours for learning English), this study set out to explore how effective the strategy of developing cohesive relationships among ESL learners was in motivating group members to work co-operatively together and to be serious in helping one another. By looking into the use of base groups in the ESL classroom, the study also hoped to see if such groups could create optimal language learning environment.

Based on the review of literature done on group cohesion and the use of base groups, two assumptions were made for this study. Firstly, if the subjects of this study who were put in base groups displayed cohesiveness in their relationships with one another, it may be concluded that the strategy of developing cohesive relationships among group members is effective in motivating them to work co-operatively and to be involved in each other's learning. Secondly, base groups are able to create optimal language learning environment.

With these underlying assumptions, this study sought to explore the use of cooperative base groups in developing group cohesion which can motivate group members to work co-operatively together and to be serious in helping one another. Specifically, the objectives of the study were:

- (1) to discover if there was cohesiveness in the relationships among base group members, and if there was, to identify descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion,
- (2) to formulate an organising scheme which classifies the descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion into different categories and sub-categories.

Significance of the Study

A survey of the literature on the use of Cooperative Learning shows two trends in the research conducted so far. Firstly, many studies have been carried out in schools with school children, but there are relatively few studies at the college level with young adults and adults (Fassinger, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1989/90; Burke, 1989). Secondly, most of the studies concentrated on the outcomes of using Cooperative Learning on achievement and non-achievement. Little attention has been paid to the process of structuring the interaction among learners and the conditions under which Cooperative Learning works to promote effective group learning (Nunan, 1992b; Chambers & Abrami, 1991; Solomon et

al , 1990, Palincsar et al , 1988) Solomon et al (1990) feel strongly that it is very important to understand how group interaction processes affect student achievement so that Cooperative Learning would not fail in most classroom settings

Besides these two trends, it is observed that there has been much research on the effects of group rewards in motivating students to work co-operatively with their group members and to be serious in helping one another (e g Slavin, 1991a, 1991b, 1990, 1989/90, 1984) However, studies on the effects of cohesive relationships among group members (without the use of group rewards) are still very much lacking Hartup (1992) observes that not much has been done to determine the manner by which friendship might affect Cooperative Learning

Since this study explores the effectiveness of cohesive relationships among group members to motivate them to work co-operatively and to be serious in helping each other, its findings can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role cohesive relationships among group members can play in motivating students to approach their group work seriously According to Cohen (1998), even though many small group specialists have been interested in group cohesion back in the 1950's, such as Stan Shachter, there is not much contemporary work on this area in Cooperative Learning Also, she feels that although much practical work in team building and a number of excellent team building exercises have been developed based on the assumption that one will not have a successful group without having achieved cohesion, the concept of group cohesion is not specifically talked about

Thus, this study which provides a descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion based on observations in a natural ESL class setting is significant to theory building on group cohesion

Secondly, it is noticed that though informal cooperative learning groups, formal cooperative learning groups and base cooperative learning groups have been recommended as strategies for structuring group work, there are no studies, to date, which look into the effectiveness of any of these strategies. As this study looks into the effectiveness of base groups as a means of creating group cohesion for optimal learning conditions in ESL classes, its findings will provide some insights into the dynamics of base groups, and the potentials of base groups, particularly in developing group cohesion

Thirdly, it is observed that to date, there is no available organising scheme of any sort which has been developed for analysing and classifying data of this nature. Therefore, the organising scheme for data analysis developed in this study which classifies the descriptive-interpretive features of group cohesion into the different categories and sub-categories will be a helpful tool for data analysis in future research work

Finally, this study is useful both to the ESL setting in general, and in the Malaysian ESL context in specific. This is because there are very few studies on the use of Cooperative Learning in second language acquisition (McGuire, 1992)

and as far as it is known, there is no research of this nature in the Malaysian ESL setting

Limitations of the Study

This study has a few limitations. The first limitation is that the questionnaire which was used as the secondary instrument for the study, could not validate all the features of group cohesion observed and generated from the data analysis of the students' journal entries. This study was approached heuristically, and as in any heuristic research, the researcher could only begin with a general notion about some aspects of the features of group cohesion under study, data collection was to include as much of the contextual information as possible to learn more about the features of group cohesion. Thus, the items designed for the questionnaire could only be based on some earlier related studies on group cohesion (which was not sufficient in helping to design a comprehensive range of items) and some of the features of group cohesion observed in passing in the journal records during the duration of the study. Many of the features of group cohesion which emerged in the later part of the study could not be picked up in time to be included in the list of questions in the questionnaire. Thus, the questionnaire could not validate all the features of group cohesion observed and identified from the data analysis of the students' journal entries. Consequently, a related limitation is that the findings of

this study which are just observations of the patterns, and not confirmation of any hypothesis, need to be tested by further research

Next, data for this study was collected from the subjects' journals and questionnaire for analysis. The subjects were asked to express in their journals their views and feelings towards their base groups, group members and the group work. The questionnaire was administered to them at the end of the semester to validate the subjective nature of the journal writing. In other words, findings of this study are based solely on the subjects' point of view.

Definition of Terms

English as a Second Language (ESL)

In the Malaysian classrooms, English is officially considered a second language and therefore, it is taught and learned as a second language. In discussing the learning of English as a second language, two common terms have always been used, i.e. "acquisition" and "learning". Krashen (1989: 8) makes a distinction between these two terms. He considers second language acquisition as "a subconscious process that is identical to the process used in first language acquisition," that is to say that while acquisition is taking place, the acquirer is not always aware of it, nor is he/she usually aware of its results. "Learning" to him, is a

"conscious knowledge", and thus when one talks about grammar or rules, one is referring to learning, not acquisition. However, some researchers do not really differentiate these two terms and they are used interchangeably. Cook (1991) for example, refers to language acquisition as language learning. Likewise, in this study, the terms second language acquisition and second language learning are used interchangeably to mean the same thing.

Optimal Language Learning Environment

In this study, optimal language learning environment refers to the social climate of the classroom (McDonell, 1992; Oakes, 1985) which is conducive for language acquisition. The environment for learning is collaborative, anxiety-free, positive, caring, supportive, secure, trusting, and meaningful to the learner; individuals are valued and mutually respected. Learners are engaged in their learning through negotiations of meaning, take risks and learn from their mistakes, and are productive in an active, interactive and cooperative classroom atmosphere.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative Learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximise their own and each other's learning (Johnson, et al.,

