

# THE EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE

## Some Hints from Counseling and Growth Groups

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How to teach more effectively is a perennial agenda item for teachers of English as a second language. This may seem like a fact hardly worth mentioning. Is it not a natural concern? However, it is not necessarily true of other academic areas. The question of content is the more usual agenda of academic meetings. What new material has been uncovered, what new theories have evolved, what are the new directions of investigation? There are probably few academic areas in which the question of teaching methods occupies such a degree of concern as in teaching English as a second language.

One might counter that this is because the subject matter we teach is relatively decided, so there is little or no room for exploration in the area of content. Therefore, it is natural that attention should be focused on teaching method. To some extent that is true, however, I think there is a more basic reason for this phenomenon. Teaching a language touches the ego of the student in a way that is different from teaching other subjects. When we encounter a student in the process of language learning, we are dealing with that person's self-image, identity, and even value system—all that makes up her selfhood. Persons are complex, and the process of learning a language is a complex process. It involves far more than memorizing words, rules of grammar, and sentence patterns. Hence the never ending search for more effective teaching methods.

We speak of learning language skills. However, the “skill” of communicating in a foreign language is different from the skill of solving a problem in mathematics. This is because of the nature of language itself and the relationship between language and ego. In one of the creation stories in the Book of Genesis it is written that humans are created in the image of God. The purpose of this story is not to support an anthropomorphic image of God, but rather to point to a similarity between the nature of God and of human beings. God is first and basically creator, and for human beings to be created in the image of God means sharing in God’s creative nature. For us humans this means specifically the ability to think and to express our thoughts in language. This is the closest we can come to creation *ex nihilo*.

It is said that all our thinking takes place in words; it is impossible to think without language. Using language, we are able to relate thoughts in such a variety of new patterns as to create new ideas that no one has ever thought before. We are able to express our experiences, understandings, and ideas as something new and unique in the history of the world. No one has ever thought exactly what I am thinking at a given moment. My verbal expression of those thoughts is a distinctly new creation. It is an expression of my very selfhood.

This is true to some extent, of course, as students come to grips with any subject matter, but in learning a new language they are dealing with the basic elements of their creative ability — words, those bricks with which they hope to construct a temple of ideas. However, those bricks are of different sizes, shapes, and consistency than the ones they are accustomed to working with. The student sometimes thinks she has erected a solid structure only to learn that there are gaping holes. She may think it is firmly established only to learn that it crumbles.

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She may try to erect a unique, artistic tower only to learn that it is an incomprehensible hodgepodge. Then there are those times when she simply stands bewildered, wanting to build something, but completely at a loss as to what bricks or mortar to use.

This is a shock to the ego—especially for an adult who has already learned to express herself adequately in one language. For the person who has achieved what C.G. Jung calls “individuation” it can be a lesson in humility, but for the person still trying to establish self-identity it can be just humiliating. At the same time, because language learning does touch the matter of ego formation and growth, it can be an opportunity to further the process of growth of the whole person. I take the position that the ultimate goal of all education is growth, and whatever skill or knowledge the student acquires is really a secondary gain. Thus the question becomes how the language learning process can be used to enhance growth.

If one holds the above position, it would seem logical to look to the areas of counseling and human relations training, which deal directly with personal growth, for some hints for building an educational climate, one in which learning that leads to growth can take place.

There are various kinds of activities concerned with personal growth: individual counseling, group counseling, and a variety of groups in self-understanding and self-expression. However, their values and stances are similar enough that they can be seen as a single movement, so for the sake of convenience I will lump them together here under the term “personal growth movement.”

Both language learning and the personal growth movement have self-expression as a goal. The counselor or group facilitator does not seek to produce carbon copies of herself nor does she

have a preconceived notion of just what the client should become. Rather her goal is to help the client discover and develop her potential in her own way. In like manner the language teacher covets for her students the experience of using the newly acquired language to express their own feelings, experiences, and ideas.

Going one step further, we could say that the purpose of self-expression is to build relationships. We humans desire and need relationships. The complaint is often heard among teachers of English as a second language that students do not really think of English as a tool for communication; rather they take it as an academic exercise, just memorizing words. If we can help the student relate to new people, new ideas, or new cultures through the newly acquired language, learning it becomes more than just an academic exercise. This is fairly simple if the student is surrounded by native speakers and can immerse herself in the culture of the new language. Without that fortuitous circumstance, however, it takes intentional imagination to create relationships through the new language. Encountering the literature of the new language may be a way in which the student can form relationships. The native speaking teacher may share something of her life and background. Reading about real or imaginary people in the culture of the new language may help build a sense of relationship.

The teacher may think of many specific ways to encourage a sense of relationship, but no method or material will automatically ensure the student's forming a relationship. This depends on a "relational attitude" within the classroom. This means that every encounter is an interpersonal communication and not just an exercise in learning words and phrases. Even when doing drills and exercises the teacher is communicating something of her interest, expectations, and values to the student. At

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the same time she is aware of what message she is getting back from the student. I think it is almost impossible to always maintain such an attitude, but an awareness of the presence or lack of a relational attitude can help the teacher understand what is happening. Also, such awareness is the *sine qua non* for nurturing a relational attitude. For better or worse, the teacher is the primary norm-setter. Difficult as it may be, it would seem that the basic ingredient in helping students think of language learning as a way of forming new relationships is for the teacher herself to constantly keep in mind a relational attitude both toward the students and toward the material they are studying. Being open to sharing herself with the students or encouraging the students to encounter the personality of the author herself when reading some literature are just hints for what this might mean specifically.

When it comes to the matter of teaching methods, we cannot expect any direct words of wisdom from the personal growth movement, but some hints may be derived from the experience accumulated through such activities. One such hint has to do with the argument about the best teaching method. For some time I was impressed and puzzled by the variety of methods and schools of therapy, all of which claimed to be the best, if not the only adequate, approach to personal growth. Gestalt therapy, rational-emotive therapy, reality therapy, non-directive therapy, psycho-analysis, analytical psychology, transactional analysis — and the list continues to grow. There is a similar proliferation of the methods used by leaders of growth groups. All of these methods are effective sometimes, but none of them are effective all the time.

This seems to imply that there is another factor, something more basic than method, involved here. In writing on the work of C. G. Jung, Frieda Fordham makes the observation, "In all his

discussion on Psychotherapy, Jung emphasized the fact that it rests on the relationship between two human beings; this is the significant thing to which all theories and methods should be secondary."<sup>1</sup>) This has been both my observation and experience.

From the standpoint of the therapist or facilitator, she must be comfortable with whatever method she is using. This may mean just being familiar enough with a particular method that it does not have to be a conscious concern during the encounter. I think it also means that the method must fit the personality of the therapist. Rational-emotive therapy, for example, attempts to convince the client that her way of thinking is illogical and harmful, but for a therapist who is not comfortable with arguing and persuading to rely on such a method would be disastrous, or at least ineffective. Most of all, however, the message that comes through strongly to me is that what the therapist takes to the relationship is basically her own personhood. Who she is as a person and how she as a person encounters the client is more important than any method.

Looking at the relationship from the standpoint of the client, one can say again that the interpersonal encounter must take precedence over method because no two clients are exactly the same. People are too complex, human growth is too complex, to expect any method of facilitating growth to fit every person.

This can be an analogy for language teaching and learning. It is not to suggest that method is not important. Some method is essential; it is the framework within which two persons encounter each other. Neither would the analogy suggest that just any method is all right. In other words, the teacher is not relieved of the responsibility of constantly looking for more effective methods of teaching. The fact that method cannot be directly borrowed or imitated places a burden on the teacher to be creative in adapting or creating methods that fit her and the

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students she encounters. Having lifted up the importance of creative methods, however, I would emphasize again that the basic ingredient in learning is the interpersonal encounter itself. No method can be a substitute for that.

Another hint from growth groups is the importance of psychological safety for an educational climate. Participants need to know that they are accepted. They need to feel that they are supported by the group even when they fail. "Developing the courage to fail" is often included in the statement of purpose of the Basic Human Relations Laboratories held by the Japan Institute of Christian Education of Rikkyo University. This means that experimentation is encouraged and failure as a result of such experimentation is lauded rather than punished. In *Sensitivity Training and the Laboratory Approach* Golembiewski and Blumberg refer to the writings of Jack R. Gibb on this point. "Gibb relates defensiveness to perceived threat or anticipated threat. The challenge of improving communication thus becomes one of behaving in ways that reduce threat. This in turn implies the building of suitable socio-emotional climates. Based on his study of recordings of numerous discussions, Gibb isolated two contrasting climates and six categories of behavior that are characteristic of them."

Defensive Climates Tend to Be Induced By	Supportive Climates Tend to Be Induced By
1. Evaluation	1. Description
2. Control	2. Problem orientation
3. Strategy	3. Spontaneity
4. Neutrality	4. Empathy
5. Superiority	5. Equality
6. Certainty	6. Provisionalism <sup>2)</sup>

The significance of some of the categories listed above for a language learning situation is apparent; others may not be so clear. Being descriptive rather than evaluative when making corrections, or relating spontaneously to what occurs in the classroom rather than being tied to lesson plans may be obvious. The importance of problem orientation rather than control gives me a hint as to why a class took on a new atmosphere when students began using their freedom to ask for and give each other help in answering questions. Gibb's list is suggestive and warrants reflective digestion. What would it mean to show empathy rather than neutrality? Does an atmosphere of provisionality rather than certainty have any place in a language learning situation? What would it mean concretely?

Whether or not all his categories are applicable to language learning, the importance of a psychologically safe climate stands out. This goes back to the point made in the beginning about the nature of language and ego. However primitive or simple a sentence may be, the student is expressing her selfhood, and failure is painful. To ridicule a student for making a mistake would set back the learning-growth process. To accept and reward a student for trying and failing will encourage greater effort. This need not rule out correction, for if Gibb is right, correction which is descriptive rather than evaluative would not counter this acceptance.

A word about motivation might be in order at this point. Here, too, there is no simple formula. People are different and are motivated in different ways. A supportive climate is necessary for anyone, but within that climate some respond well to positive strokes while others rise to a challenge. I have seen some students almost dance in response to a verbal pat on the back, and they were led to greater efforts. Other times I have seen students dig in with renewed determination when I told



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them that, in my opinion, a particular exercise was too hard for them. Out of context this sounds like a cheap gimmick, but as an honest statement in the flow of a relationship it can be a challenge that stimulates students to stretch and try something beyond their usual performance. Motivation best arises out of honest encounter between student and teacher.

In personal growth groups and many schools of counseling emphasis is place on relating in the "here-and-now." This means that program schedules are not pre-planned but are made and revised as the program itself progresses, depending on what is happening with that particular group of people as their relationships develop. It also means that plans are expendable; they may be cast aside for the sake of taking seriously what is happening at a given moment. It means that people must be alert to and aware of what is happening both within themselves and among group members and must respond to that rather than to past or imposed agenda. I am not sure how much this ideal can be lived out in a language learning classroom situation. There are factors that make it difficult, yet I believe it should be maintained as an attitude which makes one open to those times when here-and-now agenda can be seized. Any question a student asks, any information they give about themselves or classmates should be given careful attention. That is a living relationship. However simple it may be, it has more reality than the best prepared lesson materials.

This paper has been an attempt to look at similarities between the personal growth movement and language learning, assuming that both have to do with growth and ego development, to see what hints we might get for more effective teaching. It has dealt primarily with philosophical concerns. In part this is because each person must work out the specific implications for her own personality and situation. Still, a sequel might be in

order, which would be primarily anecdotal, showing how one person would try to work out the concrete implications.

#### **Footnotes**

- 1) Fordham, Frieda, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, p. 92
- 2) Golembiewski, Robert T. and Blumberg, Arthur, *Sensitivity Training and the Laboratory Approach*, p. 64

#### **Bibliography**

- Fordham, Frieda, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, Third edition, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1966
- Golembiowski, Robert T. and Blumberg, Arthur, editors, *Sensitivity Training and the Laboratory Approach*, F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., Itasca, Illinois, 1970