# HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AMONG STUDENTS IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

## CÓMO MEJORAR LA COMUNICACIÓN ENTRE ESTUDIANTES EN UNA CLASE DE LENGUAS

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## ABSTRACT

An atmosphere full of conflicts leads to uncertainty; it can even lead to difficulties in relationships and misunderstanding within the group. It is important to mention that in a classroom where there are too many disagreements and unresolved issues, there are problems of self-esteem for some of its members, which may be the cause of aggression towards others and lead to interpersonal conflicts, too. As the environment in the classroom depends on each student and their attitude, as well as a definition of one´s role within the group, a harmonic environment is constructed by collaborative and respectful behavior towards oneself and all others.

This project is a design of a program based on empowerment strategies of different pedagogical and psychological influences, aimed to improve interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships in the classroom. The term empowerment in this context is understood as increasing an individual's inner strength to make changes in their personal lives

and their environment. The objective of this project is to achieve a peaceful environment and improve communication in the classroom through empowerment techniques. Empowerment techniques in this project include exercises for students in order to develop their aware-ness about the importance of finding their unique role in the group and acting accordingly to search for a specific attitude for each member of the group that will not harm or disturb others; and to learn how to accept others, considering each student's background.

## RESUMEN

El ambiente conflictivo conduce a la incertidumbre, incluso a las dificultades en las relaciones entre todos los miembros del grupo y puede afectar la comunicación entre los compañeros. Es importante mencionar que en un salón de clases donde hay muchos desacuerdos y asuntos sin resolver, hay problemas de autoestima para algunos de sus miembros, que pueden ser la causa de la agresión hacia los demás y dar lugar a conflictos interpersonales también. En cambio, el entorno armónico es construido por el comportamiento colaborativo y respetuoso hacia uno mismo y los demás. Entonces, la definición de la propia función dentro del grupo que depende de cada estudiante y su actitud ayuda en el proceso de construcción de un clima de estudio favorable.

Este proyecto es el diseño de un programa basado en las estrategias de empoderamiento de las diferentes in-fluencias pedagógicas y psicológicas, con el objetivo de mejorar las relaciones interpersonales e intrapersonales dentro del aula. El término empoderamiento en este contexto se entiende como el aumento de la fuerza interior de un individuo para hacer cambios en su vida personal y su entorno. El objetivo de este proyecto es lograr un ambiente de paz y mejorar la comunicación en el aula a través de técnicas de empoderamiento. Técnicas de empoderamiento en este proyecto incluyen grupos de ejercicios para los estudiantes con el fin de desarrollar su conciencia sobre la importancia de encontrar su rol único en el grupo y actuar consecuentemente, encontrar una actitud específica para cada miembro del grupo, la que no va a hacer daño o molestar a los demás; aprender a aceptar a otros, teniendo en cuenta los antecedentes de cada estudiante.

## INTRODUCTION

Research on empowerment has been conducted in different groups such as women; for example, shown through the work of the international organization UNIFEM; in minority nationalities (UN); employees of a company (Kanter, 2009) or human beings in general (Spreitzer, 1995). There is also information on the use of this term in research on children and adolescents. The term "empowerment" is not always used in scientific works to talk about this subject, but expressions such as "emotional, intellectual and psychological welfare" and "self-esteem increase" have been used in some publications to indicate the result of empowerment as the process of reaching an individual´s own value, feeling oneself balanced, building, and sustaining an appropriate relationship with those around one. It is important to follow the advice of Virginia Satir (2002) to assess self-treatment, because adequate self-esteem is the key to success in overcoming all difficulties. We should seek the recovery of children and adolescents to thus heal their emotional and psychological wounds, make them feel special, and so achieve to be at peace with themselves and with others around them.

It is noteworthy that the lack of knowledge of oneself (intrapersonal) and others (interpersonal) leads to communication problems. Besides, a conflicting environment leads to the insecurity of group members because of difficulties in relationships, as the environment in the classroom depends on each student and their attitude, as well as the perception of relationships with peers and their role within the group, because a harmonic space is constructed through collaborative and respectful behavior toward self and all others. Also, in a classroom where there is too much disagreement and a lot of unresolved issues, there are problems of insecurity in the group that can lead to aggression towards others, which could cause interpersonal conflicts.

Solutions to this situation are given by Fopel (1998), revealing that the most important task of an educator is to strengthen the self-esteem of children so that they can successfully manage their lives and be proud of their past and look to the future with faith. Another author who explains the importance of this argument is Glasser (1969), by stating that love and self-worth are the two roads leading to a successful identity.

On the one hand, empowerment techniques in this project include awareness exercises for students to emphasize the importance of finding their unique role and act accordingly for the benefit

of the group. On the other hand, it helps pupils to search for new words to be able to express themselves, use new vocabulary and structure; and being involved emotionally in the topic, as it concerns them and those around them.

**Empowerment techniques**

One of the strategies that was used in this proposal is Cooperative Learning techniques, that lead a student to understanding the subject, and solve different problems by helping others. Some of the forerunners of this theory are John Dewey, Paolo Freire, and Leo Tolstoy. Despite having different points of view in pedagogy, the three authors have something in common; they believe that a collaborative group can come up with better results, and they assure that cooperation flourishes among all members of the group through collusion and solidarity (Dewey 2004; Freire 2002; Tolstoy 1962). These authors argue that the final product of a healthy environment in an institution depends on the contribution of each individual within an organization (managers, teachers, students, parents) and their role in the community. Cooperative Learning instills children´s technical skills in group work and makes them feel proud of the collective results.

Techniques used are technical puzzles, group research and performance by groups, and include exercises intended to get the cooperation of all, achieving a common goal, solving problems through a win-win way of thinking, experiencing a kind of relationship where all parties succeed, and where work based on the effort of all is evaluated. It is important to mention that collaborative education requires active members working on the same problem together, reaching the goal(s) in sync.

• Technical puzzle

It is a strategy composed of exercises that should be accomplished in groups. The essential purpose of it is that everybody works simultaneously on the same subject. For example, work where members take turns in work is not acceptable. Everyone can choose a piece of work, which they feel more comfortable with or more skillful at; however, the work has to proceed with the whole team involved at the same time and in the same place. In case of difficulties, others help the person in trouble.

*Example*

In groups of 3-4, all classmates draw on a big piece of cardboard and write their names accordingly. Include others who are not on the list but are considered as part of the group. (The teacher, a classmate who no longer studies in this class, etc.). Draw lines to indicate close relationships among some members.

• Research Group

This technique includes work in small groups on a project about a given topic. Members can divide the assignment into parts and then join it together or work out each point being each of them engaged in decision making and an elaboration process to avoid disagreements over any part of the research.

*Example*

Create the rules of social coexistence with the agreement of all students or at least most of them.

Every month, analyze the rules of social coexistence designed at the beginning of the year. Make necessary corrections.

• Performance by groups

In this technique, students prepare a presentation, which will be evaluated with a grade to the group, so that an awareness be awakened in students in that each of them depends on the qualification of everyone in the group, and everyone depends on each of them.

*Example*

Students work in pairs; in 5 minutes, each student has to tell something to their partner, and the person, who is listening, has to try to understand what their friend tells them. If something is not clear, they should ask questions to find out what their friend really meant. After 5 minutes, they change the roles. (The one who was listening, will tell something to their partner and the one who told something, will be the listener).

In this project, we must also mention Reality Therapy, to discover valuable skills that a person possesses and how these can be used to develop a topic in groups within the same classroom. This theory holds that the behavior of a human being is based on choices that lead to personal responsibility and, therefore, personal transformation. Its founder, Glasser (1969), says that an educator´s aim should be helping children understand that they are the ones responsible for their own choices in the difficult path of achieving a successful identity for themselves, and making them realize that nobody can do it instead of them.

Some exercises of this method are: making hypothetical questions to allow students to understand themselves and others in the group, asking them to tell about their lives, their likes and dislikes, with the same purpose mentioned above, or discussions on a topic of general interest. The main technique used is counseling.

Counseling is a technique comprised within Reality Therapy. (Miranda Paez, 2000). This strategy helps through listening and guiding exercises, respecting the situation of persons who are (or think they are) facing inner obstacles or those imposed by society. One of the

benefits of this tactic is that it provides mediation in personal goals that each team member proposed for the common welfare of the group.

*Example*

After watching a movie, students express their opinion, trying not to lock into their position, and understanding what was driving each character´s behavior. Pupils will also imagine how they would personally act in that situation and what the most sensitive way of performance in that case is.

It is also important to take into account the development of Family Therapy in this study because, as defined by Satir (1990), a family is a group of people who have parental or affinity ties; subsequently, children in a classroom can be considered family. She further states that well-established family relationships are a matter of survival and are of vital importance.

In this therapy, a family is understood as a whole, as a systemic organization; this is why the output of conflicts must be made by reprogramming all members thereof. Whereas children at school share academic space about six hours a day, the environment in which they operate must be peaceful and of acceptance. To achieve this goal, we must work with both: the group as such, and with every individual. Satir (1978) affirms that for a family system to be

healthy, each family member must recognize their role in it and enjoy it. This means that a family should be flexible enough in order to change rules, in order to satisfy all the underlying needs of each family member. Family therapy and development strategies help to create a strong link among all.

In this model, strategies are Family Strategies, Communication Techniques, Intervention Techniques, and a Critical System that are designed to listen and be heard; that means that we must look for ways and exercises to practice listening to each other in order to build a safe and accepting environment, to reach life conditioned with the following principles: clear communication, cooperation rather than competition, empowering rather than submitting, love, making others feel valued and fully respected, among other values that help a group of people feel accepted and accept others. (Satir 1990)

**Strategies of the family system**

It is the first phase in order to awake the awareness of the members of a "family", in this case, students in a classroom. In this technique exercise, both teacher and students, teenagers, interact with each other and the teacher. The most rewarded cases are those when students rediscover their inter and intrapersonal relationships, and see each other in a different way.

*Example*

Students tell everybody in class about themselves, their likes and dislikes, their families, hobbies, and anything else they would like to share.

## Communication Skills

In this cycle, misunderstandings may appear because of differences in opinion and behavior in the same situation.

*Example*

Each student stands up and tells the rest of the classmates how he / she feels in the group, what they like, and what they would change. (1 minute per person)

## Technical intervention

The last step is solving problems in the classroom, finding out the difficulties in relationships, and becoming aware of the sense of flexibility, forgiveness, and acceptance of others.

*Example*

Students write all the names of their classmates. They think of something that they would give as a gift to each person. It is imperative to think of something that the other person would like to receive as a present. Later, the teacher gives them a piece of paper with the name of one of their classmates written on it. Each student stands up and loudly says what they would give the person whose name has appeared on their paper, shaking hands with that person afterwards.

The NLP role in this project is also great, because it provides, on the one hand, the teacher's understanding of the reasons of students' acts, and, on the other hand, students' superior consideration in their relationships. It is known that NLP helps people to have effective long-term relationships and strengthen the self-awareness of each individual in order to, and sometimes due to, taking appropriate decisions. Its founder, Bandler (1980), considers that people who believe that the world lacks opportunities, in fact, are not able to see them, because these people have not learned how to make decisions and have not had a close example of an outstanding person in their life. Realizing what you really want to achieve, choosing the quickest and safest way to reach that, overcoming barriers, and feeling relaxed, despite problems, are some of the goals pursued by this model of interpersonal communication. Neuro-Linguistic Programming supports students´ ability to manage efficiently their emotions and understand the reasons why the rest of the group acts as they do; it also develops their understanding of accepting others.

## The strategy employed is Coaching.

Coaching is a technique that supports the task of a person to achieve

shared goals in a group. Within the practice of coaching, there are questions that lead to a better understanding of oneself and others, in order to solve misunderstandings and manage inter and intrapersonal relationships effectively.

*Example*

Each student thinks of him / herself when they were little children, feels in his/her heart the immense love for this tiny person, forgives all their mistakes. Then, they will make a drawing and keep it for times when a mistake is made, understand that it was a deed of this little being, with their fears and successes, but anyway sweet, intelligent, funny, and full of life creatures.

Studies on Situational Leadership theory imply that people consider themselves important and free to decide when they are trying to make their best effort and get a better outcome in everything they do. The authors of the book **Empowerment**, by Blanchard, Carlos and Randolf (1999), talk about their experience and conclude that someone progresses in a proper way only in case of feeling that the key people in their life trust them. Despite the fact that the above mentioned authors present cases in an office and with adults, their theory works in children or adolescents as well.

Situational Leadership Theory introduces the concept of empowerment and is based on the empowerment of staff in an enterprise. The points that lead to empowerment are: letting an employee (in our case, a student) be proud of where they work (study), making them understand that what they are doing is necessary for the institution, explaining to them why their job is significant for their boss (teacher). Suddenly, their self-esteem grows; they become a relevant part of the process of development, not only in healthy relationships in an office (classroom), but also in their growth both as a person, and the entire enterprise.

*Exercise*

- Each student tells about a person who has been an example for him or her. They should also share why they chose this person and what he/she has done for them. Students can choose among famous people or members of their families.

Finally, Humanism is a pedagogical orientation where a teacher is the protagonist in making students take into account that they are the ones who are the center of the teaching-learning process. Humanism sees a human being as the center of the universe, also, in line with it; this pedagogical theory considers that people are in the center of learning: students and teachers. As it is known, a human being is not a static being, and that is the reason why a lesson cannot be planned a hundred percent, because

the working process depends on the emotional conditions not only of students, but also of the teacher. Teaching a positive and polite attitude is a must for students to develop and strengthen their self-esteem, to learn to appreciate the work of their teachers, cooperate with peers, change their point of view when necessary, and have good will in working with others in a friendly way. That is why it is important to brace the environment of a place of study, thinking of the usage of techniques that will generate students´ feeling of comfort on a personal level, and preparing them to develop their skills with pleasure and calm, rather than other aspects of the teaching-learning process. Humanistic theory strategies allow students to feel happy with themselves and others, leading them to positive self-esteem, raising the performance of work, and at the same time, expanding a positive climate in the classroom.

As one of the founders of this pedagogical theory, Rogers (2000) says: "I found it highly rewarding when I accept another person, understanding someone else´s world." Additionally, Maturana (1984) defined society as a human being´s natural habitat. Therefore, everyone has to try to increase their ability to relate in a subtle way with everyone around.

Psychodrama Techniques and Individual Projects are effective tools to reach serenity and create pleasant relationships with others. The activities included in the strategy clarify what the students really are, let them express themselves freely, and create a beneficial environment in the classroom.

*Exercise*

• Students work in pairs or groups of three; they have to think of a situation when the attitude of at least of one person in the group is being aggressive, or passive, or assertive, or whose behavior is synergetic, unsympathetic, manipulative, prejudiced, inclusive, incongruous. Then, they role-play the situation, and the rest of the class discusses what attitude is being role-played, and which behavior should be marked instead (if it is the case).

The characteristics of each approach should have been previously discussed.

• Students draw their family and then tell the rest of the class about what they drew, why each member is at a specific place. At least 30 minutes should be given to students to draw in order to make their drawing as detailed as possible.

## About the project

This project is a design of a system based on empowerment strategies of different pedagogical and psycho-

logical trends to improve relationships, both interpersonally and intrapersonally, in a classroom. The term empowerment, in this context, is understood as the increased internal strength of an individual in furtherance to make changes in their personal lives and their environment. In the center of the project are students, because they are the ones who are influencing people around them.

The objective of this work is to reach harmonious environment and improve communication in the classroom through the techniques of empowerment. The techniques of empowerment in this project include awareness exercises for students to conceive of the importance of finding their unique role and acting accordingly for the benefit of the group; to become conscious of the fact that acquired attitude is beneficial for oneself, but it cannot hurt or disturb others. This program should be developed through learning to fully accept others, considering the background of each student.

Among the strengths of the project, can be mentioned:

- Students are interested in resolving their conflicts and the role that each plays in the group that appears to be more significant.

Adolescence and pre-adolescence is a controversial stage in the life of human beings, even though the same people when they grow as adults try to do things the right way (Berkowitz, 1962). As Fopel mentioned (1998), teenagers are quick to act and often do not know how to behave either with adults or peers. This age is perhaps the best epoch for essential questions to be answered, and their own judgment on issues of communication and internal balance to be built.

**Innovation topic**

Although many scientists, educators, and psychologists have addressed the issue of empowerment as a major factor in human development and as a way out of human problems, it is also accomplished through the help to others and encouraging others to do the same (Freire 2002; Maslow 1987; Dewey 1995; Blanchard 1996).

The opportunity given to the realization of this project for future research is the wide range of theories, seemingly different, and techniques derived from these, that facilitated this work.

We must recognize that while empowerment techniques work for young people, the work has to be continuous and when started, cannot stop or be interrupted. Some children and adolescents continue to advance in this matter after the course; however, most of the group will need an experienced

adult, who is aware of this topic, to guide, advise, and conduct critical thinking to the right flow, and timely interpret facts.

Because of all these reasons, deeply reflecting on the issue, considering the amount of results, noting dependencies between the attitude of each of the members and the atmosphere created in the same group, taking into account the age and characteristics of each individual in the classroom, I think this subject should be included within the hidden curriculum of each school.

## How it works

There are some conditions to facilitate empowerment in people, among which it is worth mentioning (Kanter 2009; Spreitzer 1995; Blanchard, Carlos and Randolf 1999):

- Distribution of the complete information, including controversial issues
- Clear description of the role of each participant and the way how change will affect each of them
- Comprehensible instructions on the process and the work of each member
- Transparent communication, demonstrating respect for all
- Affirmation that the result is worth the effort

- Dialogue among all on how the work could be executed more effectively and efficiently.

Moreover, Spreitzer (1995) believes that the following conditions lead to empowerment:

- When individuals perceive links between their work / study and personal goals
- When duties concur with values, beliefs and behavior of the individual
- When individuals feel that they are able to fulfill the tasks given
- When an individual has the determination to carry out the work

Kończak, Stelly, and Trusty (2000) consider that an empowered person is the one who can delegate work, who can comprehend what the achievements and failures of the work are, who are able to make their own decisions, who feel confident sharing information, who constantly develop skills in areas required to strengthen teamwork, and continuous training for future innovations.

## Recommendations

The person who decides to work on this project, should know about empowerment, constantly read about the subject, and have determination to do their best in practice. They also have to

be flexible at times, but without leaving the line criteria and always thinking of the best of the students over any other matter.

The number of students in the classroom is also a key to the proper construction of a favorable climate in the classroom element. Here is the Serrano formula (1998):

"+ TEACHERS - SIZE CLASS = BETTER EDUCATION = BETTER FUTURE"

does not only work on an academic level, but, and I would say even more, refers to the environment in a classroom, because the ability to build healthy relationships is perhaps the primary skill before developing any other competency.

"... Life unfolds with people, and what happens between people is the main determinant of what happens to them and the environment around them." (Satir, 2002)

It is also necessary to consider the characteristics of a specific group where activities will be applied. Depending on the age, general culture knowledge,

beliefs, socio-economic level of the children, the intensity and way to prepare classes should vary.

Effort leads to solutions of a problem, for exercising over and over again is the way for mastery in any field. This is absolutely true in all skills, including managing human relationships and the building of a healthy, harmonious, and balanced environment within the study place. So, one of the fundamental suggestions is to work hard, for the longest time possible, considering that in matters of communication among humans, it does not always work in a straight line; we must be strong and determined to leave any kind of difficulties behind.

This program can be replicated in the future for further investigations to demonstrate that the project is viable and absolutely successful, no matter the circumstances and favorable conditions. What really led it to triumph was the proper design of a study scheme, detailed inquiry, and the attitude of the participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

So, it is undeniable that empowerment techniques help humans feel good with themselves and everyone around them. Therefore, the problem

that this work has raised is focused on a change of attitude of both teacher and student in the short, medium, and long term. Techniques of empowerment, de-

signed in this project, will route in the direction of empowerment, self-worth and emotional maturity of students; will enable to build favorable surroundings both within and outside school and, most importantly, will guide them in the difficult but essential task to know and accept themselves.

Considering the analysis of all the variables as a whole, and that it has been fully shown that the project had positive results, we can conclude that empowerment techniques benefit the environment in a classroom.

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