

NATO BILC Professional Development Seminar

Lithuania, Vilnius, October 3-7 2021

Workshop Summary

*Organising effective grouping for better learning*

Definitions:

Grouping = the action of putting people or things in a group of groups

Group forming = for a group to exist and actually work together, its members must first form the group; it's about moving from individuals sitting together in a room to driving their efforts towards making this into an association of people working together and directing their actions towards the accomplishment of a common goal aka group formation, team development, team building

Introduction:

Sometimes, the grouping is done on some very basic and arbitrary criteria = alphabetical order or same groups as the overall academy groups.

Some other times, some language criteria are taken into account for the grouping.

There are many different grouping cases – between the arbitrary grouping and the perfectly designed grouping process, there is a whole range of cases and the idea today is to discuss if in each one of your cases, the grouping is done in the best effective way.

We all agreed that grouping had either a positive or a negative impact on the teaching conditions.

Structure of the workshop:

First, how to you define the current strategy in your organisation for effective grouping? (Each participant gives an answer)

Second, what actions can be carried out in my organisation to implement more effective grouping strategies with the means at hand? (Each participant gives an answer)

Third, how to we manage group forming? How do we use team building to manage the impact of badly designed grouping in order to mitigate its impact on group motivation?

The basis of our discussion will be in-person teaching. Once we have gone through the three stages I have just mentioned, we will discuss how this applies to blended learning, hybrid learning and remote teaching.

With one group, we only went through the first and second step; with the second group, we went through step 1, 2, 3.

First question:

Current grouping strategy in your organisation

Consequences of arbitrary grouping: cheating, awkward situations with pressure on the most advanced students for cheating,

Grouping based on level = stigmatises the lower levels but it can also give them the motivation to show they are not the worst group

Grouping based on level = in some organisations, it leads to multi-rank groups. This makes group forming a very difficult challenge to meet.

Grouping based on the desired outcome = multi-level groups, tendency to focus on the most advanced students and therefore impossible to focus on individual needs

A lot of the issues above can be due to a badly designed placement test.

Grouping that works well = based on the level of the 4 skills; flexibility in the number of students per group; similar expertise and profession

We all agreed that grouping had an impact on motivation, may it be positive or negative

Second question:

What actions could be taken with the means at hand? And what actions could be taken when the conditions are at their best?

A better selection process needs to be set up in coordination with the services prior to the beginning of the course. This requires better personnel management. More time can then be dedicated to the actual language practice.

HR needs to prioritise who accesses language training.

Better awareness needs to be developed up the chain of command on the importance of the time required to build an effective language course. The chain of command tends to think the learning process is the same whether you are instructing shooting or teaching a language. It is key to use learner feedback to get the right messages up the chain of command.

Recruitment of language professionals may they be military or civilians; this cannot be left to the military personnel that have no expertise in the field.

A better balance of teaching time between lower level students and higher level students is necessary. The teachers need to be able to focus on the weaker students.

A written test + an interview should be the bare minimum for effective grouping.

The courses should not be focused on testing as constant testing is not inductive for language learning. It creates a phenomenon focused on statistics and not on skill-development. The courses need to be performance-based.

The financial incentive and/or the promotion incentive changes the approach to the language course. The necessity to take a test every three years to maintain a specific level pushes personnel to focus on life-long learning.

Standardised content is counter-productive. Teachers need to be trusted more so that they can respond specifically to the needs of the learners.

The silver bullet seems to be an increased teaching team, time and smaller groups.

Third question:

Smaller groups are part of the key to effective group forming.

Individual interviews could be used to frame the teaching and learning environment and to warn the learners about the composition of the group.

Engineering the learning environment towards peer-to-peer instruction can highly mitigate disparity in rank or level.

Team building activities, if necessary in civilian dress, should be given priority before starting the language learning. There will be no effective language learning if the group forming didn't take place.

Conclusion:

Effective grouping is the line that you will draw between dividing vs uniting. Not only does grouping have a huge impact on the teaching conditions but, in fact, and it is counter-intuitive, it is the first step to effective group forming. It really is the foundational layer that will give the teacher the steady ground to make all those individuals a team working towards a common goal.