"A good all-round French workout" or "a massive stress"?: Perceptions of group work among tertiary learners of French[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative group work in second language learning usually involves the completion of short tasks undertaken in one session rather than long-term group projects where learners need to work collaboratively and negotiate concepts, ideas, and knowledge over a substantial period of time, and where such peer collaborative processes are known to contribute to deep learning. This study aimed to ascertain whether a cohort of intermediate learners of French were conscious of these beneficial learning processes during one such group project completed over a six-week period. Findings suggest that a majority of students made clear connections between the benefits of collaborative group work and the positive effect on their learning. Nonetheless, a large proportion of students felt quite ambivalent towards the task, particularly when responses were compared to other learning activities and what they perceived as more traditional assessment tasks completed during the semester (i.e. grammar tests).

1. Introduction

It is now common practice in the tertiary sector to use collaborative tasks as a means of enhancing learners' undergraduate experience, since it is generally accepted that group work assists in the development of university graduate attributes by equipping students with the knowledge and teamwork skills required in the 'real world' (i.e. the work force) (James, McInnis, & Devlin, 2002 inter alia). Group work requires learners to work collaboratively to negotiate concepts, ideas, knowledge, timelines and workload in order to complete the task successfully and on time — all attributes that are increasingly valued by employers. Group work also provides a useful counterpart to the otherwise somewhat individualistic and competitive environment that prevails in tertiary settings.

Much research has been conducted on peer learning and its benefits in a tertiary environment (e.g. Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Fowler, Gudmundsson, & Whicker, 2006; Topping & Ehly, 2001). Such studies have shown that where group work and peer collaboration have many benefits that contribute to deep learning (see Biggs & Tang, 2007; Gardner, 2007); i.e. the critical analysis of new ideas, linking them to known concepts and principles, and leading to understanding and long-term retention of concepts. In contrast, surface learning, which refers to the tacit acceptance of information and

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memorisation as isolated and unlinked facts, infers superficial retention of material without promoting understanding or long-term retention of knowledge and information.

Working collaboratively enables learners to pool their knowledge and produce work of a more sophisticated level than when completed individually. The collective aspect of knowledge building is an important part of the student learning process, a privileged occasion for peers to learn from each other, notice gaps in their learning and articulate their knowledge and skills in relation to that of others. Slavin (1996, 2011) identified four major theoretical perspectives on collaborative or cooperative learning: cognitive developmental and cognitive elaboration versus motivational and social cohesion — although he specified that these perspectives should be considered complementary, not contradictory (for details, please refer to Slavin, 2011).

The two cognitive perspectives on collaborative work have their basis in the theories of cognitive and social constructivism outlined by scholars such as Piaget and Vygotsky. These cognitive perspectives focus on the interactions among groups of students, where the interactions themselves lead to better learning (Slavin, 2011). Work from the cognitive elaboration perspective asserts that learners must engage in some manner of cognitive restructuring (elaboration) of new materials in order to learn them. For example, Piaget (1985) believed that cognitive growth occurs as a result of interaction with the environment through the process of adaptation, followed by processes of assimilation and accommodation. New experiences are brought into one's way of thinking (assimilation) and low-level schemas are modified into high-level schemas (accommodation). Following such modifications, the individual seeks to restore cognitive equilibrium. Piaget believed that peers could provide important opportunities for others to experience cognitive disequilibrium (or cognitive conflict) when new information does not agree with existing knowledge, and that learners are more likely to develop cognitively in contexts where peers have equal power and opportunities to influence each other. For Piaget then, cooperation between peers encourages discussion and exchange, and is therefore essential for the development of a critical and reflective mind. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) proposed that knowledge lies in the continual interaction between the individual and their environment. The notion that cognitive development requires social interaction is central to Vygotsky's (1978) well known concept of *the zone of proximal development*, defined as:

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (p.86).

Vygotsky believed that collaborative activity among children promotes cognitive development because children of similar ages are likely to be operating within each other's zones of proximal development, modelling behaviours more advanced than those they could perform as individuals (Slavin, 2011).

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is highly relevant to language learning. Assistance comes from a more competent peer who can recognise the learner's current level of L2 proficiency, and who can provide appropriate supportive conditions or 'scaffolding' (guidance, tutelage questions, hints), so that the learner can extend their current skills and knowledge to a higher level of competence. Of particular relevance to this study is the notion of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994) — hereafter referred to as peer scaffolding — where learners can extend their own knowledge and that of their peers through working together. This in turn assists the learners to become more autonomous in their language development (Benson, 2006). As Storch also indicates, group work is supported by the communicative approach to L2 instruction and its emphasis on providing learners with opportunities to use the L2 (Storch, 2005), although peer scaffolding can of course also take place in the L1 (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, 2000).

Studies conducted by Dörnyei and Malderez (1997 inter alia) adopt more of a motivational and social cohesion perspective on cooperative learning, where task motivation is considered the most impactful part of the learning process (Slavin, 2011). In the case of language learning in particular, the authors claim that successful collaborative language learning experiences can be directly attributed to good group dynamics and cooperative learning processes (CL) (term coined by Dörnyei, 1997). According to Dörnyei and Malderez, the reason for the direct correlation between good group dynamics and successful language learning is the quantity and quality of interaction and cooperation between group members (1997). Groups provide guidelines and standards for students to evaluate themselves and this can be a substantial source of motivation for learning the L2. Dörnyei (1997) argues that the affective domain of CL (i.e. what he calls group cohesiveness) plays a crucial role in generating educational potential through peer cooperation and together with positive interdependence of group members, the CL process generate motivation which energises learning.

The learner is unlikely to experience such benefits where collaboration fails, however; for example, where learners' levels of engagement with and commitment to group projects is low because of the sustained effort and commitment required by all group members over a lengthy period of time. In the case of groups where only a few members do most of the work, it is unlikely that the process will foster deep learning for all participants. Furthermore, it has been shown that the lack of member involvement can damage the learning climate and lead to student frustration and resentment (McCorkle, Reardon, Alexander, Kling, Harris & Iyer, 1999). In other words, the formative purpose of collaborative tasks can in fact be sidelined by negative experiences. These can be broadly organised into two related categories: (1) the unequal contribution of all group members as described above — due either to organisational problems or to "social loafing" (George, 1992); and (2) the (perceived or actual) fairness of the evaluation of the final product. Grades are either derived from the assessment of the group as a whole or from individuals within the group. In either case, the given grade counts towards individual results in the subject. Collaborative tasks are thus resented by some learners who feel disadvantaged by having to work with other