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Making films in French and Italian:
A collaborative approach to language learning

Abstract

While collaborative group projects are common across most areas of study at tertiary level, long-term group projects in the area of second language learning are less common. This contribution will describe the implementation of two similar group projects in first year advanced French and Italian courses at two Melbourne universities. In the Italian case, we will describe how film can be used as a tool to assist students to critically evaluate text. For French, we will report on some measurable outcomes and the students’ perception of the group project. Our experiences suggest that implementing creative projects of this nature goes beyond simple novelty and allows students to connect meaningfully with their learning.

1. Introduction

Collaborative group projects are commonplace in most disciplines in the tertiary sector for several reasons. Peer collaboration is seen as enhancing the learning experience, developing certain graduate attributes (James, McInnis and Devlin 2002 inter alia) and equipping students with the teamwork and time management skills required in the work place. An important and substantial body of research exists on peer learning and the academic benefits of group work (Boud, Cohen and Sampson 2001; Falchikov 2001; Fowler, Gudmundsson and Whicker 2006; Ladyshewsky 2001, 2006; Topping 1996; Topping and Ehly 2001 inter alia), and several of these studies have shown that successful peer collaboration contributes to deep learning (cf. Biggs and Tang 2007; Gardner 2007; Ramsden 1992); i.e. the critical analysis of new ideas, linking them to known concepts and principles, and leading to deeper understanding and long-term retention of concepts.

Working collaboratively allows learners to produce a more sophisticated piece of work than when working individually and to learn from each other in the process. Central to this learning are, of course, the theories of cognitive and social constructivism outlined by Piaget (1985) and Vygotsky (1978). These cognitive perspectives focus on the interactions among groups of students, where the interactions themselves lead to better learning and thus better achievement (Slavin 2011: 160). These principles are highly relevant to second language (L2) learning. Assistance comes from a more competent peer who recognises the learner’s current level of L2 proficiency and who can provide appropriate supportive conditions or scaffolding so that the learner can extend their current skills and knowledge. Of
particular relevance to group work in language learning is the notion of *collective scaffolding* (Donato 1994), 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).

Despite the recognised benefits of group work, and the substantial body of research into collaborative and peer learning, there are relatively few studies focussing on L2 group projects completed over a sustained period of time (Saint-Léger and Mullan 2014). Research on group work in L2 learning tends to focus on the completion of short tasks usually completed over one session, either as part of a regular lesson (Otha 2000; Storch 2005; Swain and Lapkin 1998) or in a session specifically set up for the research project (Long, Inagaki and Ortega 1998; Mackey, Gass and McDonough 2000; Wigglesworth and Storch 2009).

This contribution will describe the implementation and some measurable outcomes of a successful first-semester first-year undergraduate L2 group project which takes place over six weeks and is completed by the students for the most part outside of class. The project was first introduced in 2010 in the first-year advanced stream (i.e. post Year 12) Italian course at the University of Melbourne. The project was adapted and introduced into the corresponding level French course at RMIT University in 2011.

The learning outcomes of the collaborative project are to:

1. help students gain a greater insight into, and to share and increase their knowledge of, French or Italian language and culture through peer interaction
2. enhance students’ learning of vocabulary and grammatical structures (e.g. through learning lines)
3. allow students to produce work of a more ambitious scope, both in terms of content and language, than would otherwise be possible individually
4. encourage students to engage with texts and themes in a creative way, while maintaining a critical approach
5. allow students to reflect on their achievement over the semester
6. create something memorable to share with wider interested parties
7. assist with some of the challenges often associated with first year transition to university by helping students to form networks in their cohort and establishing a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) from their first semester at university.

2. The group project

2.1 The students

In both institutions, students in the first year advanced stream have learnt French or Italian as a second or additional language for various lengths of time and in a variety
of different contexts. This level is also typically made up of first, second and third year undergraduate students. First year students may have studied the L2 through high school to Year 12 (the most typical case at the University of Melbourne) or may have acquired their knowledge of the language outside formal education (e.g. whilst living overseas). Second and third year students are those who started in the ab initio or intermediate stream one or two years earlier. Such mixed proficiency levels and student diversity are common in language classes and are managed to a large extent by encouraging peer support and adapting the learning and teaching activities. For this reason, this is an appropriate level in which to implement a collaborative group project. The first year students in these cohorts—who face additional well-documented challenges during their transition to university (cf. James, Krause and Jennings 2009; Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis 2005; McInnis and James 1999; McInnis, James and Hartley 2000)—benefit particularly from the peer support in this task. Second and third year learners with a lower L2 proficiency benefit linguistically from their peers with a higher level of L2.

2.2 The project

In groups of three to four (French) or up to six (Italian), students were asked to write a script, direct, act in and film a scene based on a film: for French this was La Haine (‘Hate’, dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995) and for Italian Il partigiano Johnny (‘Johnny the Partisan’, dir. Guido Chiesa, 2000). La Haine depicts the 24 hours following a riot in the lives of three friends Vinz, Hubert and Said. They are in their early twenties, come from immigrant families and live in a multi-ethnic housing commission in a low socioeconomic suburb on the outskirts of Paris. Students spent the entire curriculum (two classes of two hours a week) for that semester studying the language and themes of the film. This included studying grammar in context as well as colloquial grammar and vocabulary and le verlan (a form of French slang) and topics such as life in the Parisian suburbs, racism, immigration, youth and issues of identity. Some of the other assessment tasks for the semester such as short test answers, listening comprehension exercises and oral assessment (in the form of a debate) were also based on the film or the themes of the film.

The first year Italian subjects are organised as an intensive revision and extension of students’ knowledge of Italian language and culture. Their class time is divided between seminars and tutorials with a linguistic focus and a lecture and tutorial cycle on Contemporary Italy in one semester and literature in the other. The choice of Il partigiano Johnny is linked in a cross-curricular way to the Contemporary Italy component which explores Italy from the Second World War to the present. Chiesa’s film explores the situation of Italian partisans in the turbulent final years of the war in Northern Italy in a post-neorealist style.

Using their knowledge of the context of the film and the film itself, the students must create an additional scene of ten to fifteen minutes maximum which fits coherently somewhere in the film. The French students are instructed that this should not be an alternative final scene as the actual final scene of La Haine is...
ambiguous and lends itself to one of two interpretations. This instruction is to avoid the possibility of several students creating similar scenes. The Italian students are directed to create a scene which we do not see on screen—this could also be a scene after the final scene in the film which, like the ending of *La Haine*, is ambiguous. In each scene the students’ individual spoken part must be an equal length of time, e.g. between two and five minutes. The task assesses the students’ understanding of the film and its context, their use of spoken and written L2, as well as their creativity and originality. Students have approximately six weeks to work on their project and the viewing of the scenes usually takes place in the last class of semester with the other class members as the audience. At the same time, students submit a DVD or electronic copy of their scene, together with a written script for the scene which includes an introduction (around 300 words), with the following sections:

- a description of the scene
- the rationale behind the content of the scene
- where the scene fits into the film
- the characters portrayed in the scene
- where the scene takes place
- where the inspiration for the scene comes from
- the script itself in the L2
- DVD/electronic copy of scene

The French students are also required to submit weekly individual blog entries in French on the university’s learning management system (Blackboard) from weeks 7 to 11. The aim of these blogs is primarily to allow the teacher to monitor progress on the project and to give the students a forum to ask questions and receive advice about the project. The students’ French is not corrected or assessed, to minimise the time and potential anxiety around writing the blogs. The blogs are a useful way of encouraging the students’ written practice without the stakes attached to assessed work. Some class time, between four and eight hours, is devoted to working on the film project where the teacher is present and available to assist. Beyond this, students are required to meet outside of class time to complete the assessment task.

To take the French case as an example, the assessment task is worth 30% of the total marks for the semester and the assessment criteria reflect the formative and summative objectives of the task, as well as the students’ collective and individual contributions. Sixty per cent of the mark for this assessment is a collective mark attributed to all group members and focused in equal parts on content (the coherence and relevance of the scene), performance and language (quality and appropriateness). Forty per cent of the mark is attributed individually and focuses equally on the accuracy of the language, intonation and pronunciation and the relevance of the student’s contribution in relation to the overall performance (see Appendix A).
The project design and timeframe provide several opportunities for peer scaffolding: the collective writing and editing of the script aids with grammatical and vocabulary development, while the regular rehearsals enhance speaking skills. The rationale for the project and the importance of peer scaffolding in learning are explained to the students at the outset. The project instructions are also explained in detail, since it has been shown that a lack of guidance and preparation can contribute to student dissatisfaction with group projects (Payne, Monk-Turner, Smith and Sumpter 2006; Pepper 2010: 704). For this reason, students are asked to take responsibility for a particular role in their group from among the following: project manager; problem-solver and peace keeper; linguist; IT expert. Guidelines are provided for what each of these roles entails to assist the students further.

The Italian case is very similar in design. Appendix B contains the main information page on the film project from the online learning management system. The three criteria for assessment are similar to those of the French project with the final mark based on a combination of group and individual marks. The lion’s share of the final mark is a group mark based on content (50%) which is broken into overall impression and coherence with the film (15%), historical content (25%) and presentation and originality (10%). A shared mark of 20% goes to each group for the script and the remaining 30% is dedicated to individual oral production, divided equally between fluency, pronunciation and intonation. Students are also rated on their accent but this is not scored.

Time constraints have also been found to negatively affect group work (Strauss and U 2007: 151, 157). However, the six-week timeframe allocated to this project is considered sufficient. Firstly, the project has to be completed within a twelve week semester and secondly, the first six weeks of semester allows networks to start forming before students are asked to self-select into groups for the project. The aim of presenting the projects to peers in the last class of the semester is to celebrate the achievement of learners at the end of the course. Furthermore, the project outcome is relatively small in scope and relies mainly on the linguistic knowledge of group members (rather than data collection and analysis, for example). In addition, clear timelines are given with advice as to what stage of the project the students should be at each week, from the formation of the groups and allocation of roles and responsibilities in week six, through to the presentation of the project in week 12. A recent innovation in the Italian project has included the submission of a ‘project brief’ after the first week of the project in which groups must outline their vision for their short film. This allows for timely feedback in case projects are inappropriate or do not respond well to the criteria of the task.

2.3. Student feedback

Student feedback on these two projects was collected qualitatively and informally through end of semester course evaluation questionnaires and mid-semester expectations (Italian students only). Both French and Italian students were asked about their perceptions of the usefulness of the group project. Comments received
from French students since the inception of the project in 2011 are presented in Table 1 below; comments from the 2012 Italian cohort are also presented (Table 2). Feedback has been amalgamated across the cohorts into similar comments: on average, the French students number approximately 22 each year; the Italian students number approximately 60 each year. A number of similar responses can be seen across the two languages and the year cohorts in the tables below.

**Table 1: French students’ evaluations of the group project, and average grades**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2011 Course Evaluation Survey</th>
<th>2012 - 2013 Course Evaluation Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>too much work for 30%; time consuming</td>
<td>demanding technically; too much work to organise the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too demanding technically</td>
<td>not a good test of our language competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doesn’t test knowledge of French</td>
<td>time consuming but worth it in the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not relevant to course</td>
<td>do role play instead to minimise technical work involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would prefer exam or essay</td>
<td>would rather just write the script – difficult to be a ‘gangster’ when we are very white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 minute scene too long</td>
<td>very useful: learnt a lot from project and from working with others; got to use French in a ‘real world’ situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no time to work on it in class</td>
<td>fun; got to create something in French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fun approach</td>
<td>very relevant to the course, much more so than an exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good way to interact with other students</td>
<td>great way to learn through repeating our lines before filming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>films were funny and interesting—loved seeing others’ work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average grade: 79%</td>
<td>average grade: 76% / 80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lowest grade: 70%</td>
<td>lowest grade: 67% / 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>highest grade: 91%</td>
<td>highest grade: 87% / 87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Italian students’ evaluations of the group project, and average grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 mid-semester expectations</th>
<th>2012 Student Experience Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...the use of group work and assessments as learning a language is more efficient and enjoyable to do with friends.</td>
<td>The emphasis on Italian culture [was positive].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the assessment tasks are really engaging and I am learning so much from them.</td>
<td>There are so many diverse aspects of this subject (e.g. grammar, speaking, writing, film, history, culture). This in itself makes the subject very interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The things we are learning about in our contemporary Italy lectures have definitely given me a deeper insight into the country and culture of the language I’m learning.</td>
<td>The group projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The creative breadth of what we are exposed to is wonderful.</td>
<td>Dedicated group of talented students, stimulating assessment tasks, and the Italia Contemporanea section was very well done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has been completely different to what I thought, I didn’t realise there would be such a big emphasis on culture and history.</td>
<td>The film and history project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find it frustrating that the assessments are so vague and non-concrete. For me, it would make more sense to do things like Exams rather than all this wishy wash group work.</td>
<td>I loved working with my group in the Progettino Film. I was very fortunate to be in such a dedicated and fun group of girls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The projects throughout the semester were different and interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>...at times, I’d forget that I was also learning in the process!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>average grade: 79% lowest grade: 73% highest grade: 90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Discussion

3.1. French students

While two positive comments were received from the 2011 cohort (fun approach; good way to interact with other students), the overwhelming majority of feedback was negative: basically the students found the project too much work and too time-consuming. The feedback concerning the length of the scene and the lack of class time to work on the project has since resulted in a shorter scene and some class time being made available for the project. While these comments were perhaps to be
expected, what was more surprising were the comments around the lack of relevance of the project to the course and the project not testing the students’ knowledge of the language. Given that this was the first time the project had been run (and indeed this first year advanced French course), a number of other factors may have been involved, as is often the case with a first time offering of a course. The feedback from this student cohort was in fact quite negative about several aspects of this course and it is possible that the project was more strongly criticised because of that.

Comments from the 2012 and 2013 cohorts have been combined as they are essentially the same and indicate a more positive experience of the group project overall. While comments around the workload and technical demands of the project still appeared, the students not only generally enjoyed the project, but also explicitly mentioned some of the benefits which were the aims of the project:

- learnt a lot from project and from working with others; got to use French in a ‘real world’ situation; got to create something in French; very relevant to the course, much more so than an exam; great way to learn through repeating our lines before filming; films were funny and interesting – loved seeing others’ work.

It was particularly gratifying to see that these students recognised the benefits of working collaboratively: they appreciated the chance to use ‘real world’ French (see above quote) and to create something in the L2; they saw the relevance of the project to the course; and understood the benefit of learning lines. Finally, they welcomed the chance to see each other’s work and to celebrate their achievements. There are a number of possible reasons for the move towards this more positive feedback. The course has now been offered three times and, as to be expected, has improved as the teaching staff become more familiar with the course, the project and indeed the issues around first year transition. The required length of the scene has been halved from 2011 and class time is now set aside for the students to work on their project in the presence of teaching staff, who they can call on for advice if necessary. This support has somewhat improved the overall student experience. Additionally, recent improvements to computer applications for creating and editing films, such as iMovie (Apple) and Windows Movie Maker (Microsoft), mean that the technical difficulties involved in this project are reducing continually.

One other interesting aspect of the 2011-2013 French students’ projects is the grades allocated to the students. Despite the high level of dissatisfaction among the 2011 cohort, their grades (average, lowest and highest) are in fact all at least 3% higher than the 2012 cohort and 4% higher than the highest grade for 2012 or 2013 (91% vs. 87%). The average 2013 student grade is higher than that of 2012 (80% vs. 76%) and more similar to that of 2011 (80% vs. 79%); the 2013 lowest grade (73%) is higher than either 2011 or 2012; and the highest grade for 2012 and 2013 are the same (87%). It is true that the students provided feedback on the project before receiving their grades but it can be seen that higher grades do not necessarily correlate with students’ perception of their work. While asking students about
their perceived usefulness of the project is clearly not the same as asking about the perceived quality of their work, one might nevertheless expect the students’ perception of the quality of their work to influence their perception of the usefulness of the project.

3.2. Italian students

The overriding theme of the feedback from Italian students is that the creative style of assessment and the use of group work allows for a way of working on language and culture that creates a rich environment, providing engagement, enjoyment and learning. While some students indicate a preference for the more ‘concrete’ essay-exam style of assessment scheme, the majority expressed very positive views of the integration of group projects and film into the subject. This is a pleasing outcome as innovation is sometimes met with resistance.

From a teaching and learning point of view, the principal aim of the film project is not to make the subject ‘fun’ but rather to create a stimulating context for the analysis of a complex text. Students were very clear about the learning achieved in this project, which is a valuable piece of feedback confirming the validity of this approach to textual analysis, rather than the traditional ‘watch this film, read these articles, write an essay’ approach. We would also suggest that it is much more gratifying for staff to experience the creative potential of their students instead of ploughing through reams of (sometimes poorly) written material.

4. Conclusion

Clearly, the aim of this contribution is to encourage consideration of alternative approaches to assessing student engagement with text. While student perceptions of the task are not unanimously positive, in the majority there was support in both cohorts for the increased benefits of an approach using film production as the assessment task. In the interests of promoting this type of project, we would offer the following summation of the benefits:

- With a film project like this teaching staff can see the learning—the intellectual work required is typical (critical literacy) of much of what is done in universities but the outcome offers a much more nuanced picture of student learning. Indeed, the most effective projects appropriate the ‘language’ of the original film: visual, linguistic, stylistic, etc. to produce a new scene which reflects the understanding of the filmic text.

- Who wants to share an essay with friends? Students create a memento of their learning which they can use in various fora to showcase their development. The psychological benefits of this should not be underestimated.
• The group work nature of the projects provides a cohort experience and goes some way towards addressing the problematic issues related to the first year transition for some students.

• An important goal in university language programs is to widen students’ horizons about what language and culture really can be. The type of effort involved in these small film projects is fertile ground for the enrichment of students’ views.

• In both of the cases described in this contribution, teaching staff provided next to no technical support. Indeed, given students’ increasing familiarity with technology, we would suggest that zero technical support is not a problem. This should alleviate the stress felt by some academics who feel that their own technical expertise is wanting.

• After a few iterations of the project, we advise that some time in class to work on the project really makes the difference. It gives status to the project as well as allows teaching staff the opportunity to ensure things are on track.

• One of the effects of the massification of university study is reduced opportunities for creativity, since we all feel overworked. These film projects allow all students to express their creativity in the context of a critical approach to text and language and culture.

One final word of caution is in order. For projects like this to thrive, all teaching staff involved need to be fully invested in it and need to foster that investment in the students. This is particularly important where more than one person is involved with the students. While the impetus for the project might come from the subject coordinator, all teaching staff must equally share the enthusiasm, otherwise the outcome can be compromised. Given the challenge for most university language programs to engage students with text, language and culture, an approach which combines the critical eye of film analysis with the creative hands of film production seems to provide interesting prospects for those willing to give it a try.

References


Pepper, C. 2010. ‘There’s a lot of learning going on but NOT much teaching!’: student perceptions of problem-based learning in science. *Higher Education Research and Development* 29 (6), 693-707.


**Appendix A: French**

**Assessment criteria**

There will be two parts to the assessment: one collective, one individual.

**Collective component: content, performance as a group, language 60%**

**Content (20 points):**

Does the scene fit coherently with the film?
Is the scene relevant and appropriate to the context of the film?
Is the scene well planned?
Performance (20 points):

Is the overall content of the performance easily understandable? (Voice projection, overall quality of intonation during interaction.)
Does every member of the group speak for approximately the same amount of time?
Does the performance fit the characteristics of the film? (Plot, narrative progression etc.)

Language (20 points):

Is the language used overall appropriate, relevant, correct?

Overall:

Does the outcome of the task suggest that the group was well prepared for the performance?
Is the concept original?

Individual component: language use, intonation, pronunciation, content 40%

Language (10 points)

Is the language used by the student appropriate, relevant, precise?

Intonation (10 points)

Is the intonation appropriate?
Is the speech natural?

Pronunciation (10 points)

Is the student easily understandable?
Is the pronunciation clear?

Content (10 points)

Is the student’s input interesting, justified, appropriate in relation to the overall scene?

Blackboard

• Each group will be allocated a blog space on Blackboard; this space is yours, should you wish to work online with your team members.
• Whether you choose to work online or not, each team member will need to post a WEEKLY SUMMARY (from week 6 to week 12) of their involvement in the project for that week. Individual accounts must be posted before Sunday 9pm
of each week. This weekly account must be in French (language accuracy will not be assessed) and should be between 50 to 150 words maximum per person.

- What is the point of the weekly account?
- Along with the form stating the level of involvement of group members in the project to be submitted with your assignment, this weekly account of activities is a way to provide supporting evidence of your contribution to the project, to ensure that the work is shared fairly. Should a student be found to have contributed little to the performance, he or she will receive a 0 for the collective component of the assessment.

Appendix B: Italian

Film project

In small groups you will script, direct and film a small interaction based on the film Il partigiano Johnny. You will form groups of 3-5 people. Using your knowledge of the historical context of the film, the book on which it is based and the film itself, your scene will fill in some of the (imagined) details of the story between appropriate characters which we are not shown. This task aims at assessing two things:

1. your understanding of the film and its context
2. your use of spoken and written Italian

Your film needs to include equal screen time for all members of the group.

Each person’s spoken part needs to be around 3 minutes long.

Each group will need to submit via the link below the following two (2) items:

1. Your script which will include:
   - An introduction in English, with the following sections: a description of your scene, the rationale behind the content of your scene, where it fits into the film, the characters portrayed, where it takes place, where the inspiration for the scene comes from (maximum 300 words)
   - Your script in Italian
2. The film itself:
   - you will create the film using a video camera - if needed you can use one of the School of Language & Linguistics’ flip videos (see http://www.theflip.com/en-au/ for more information)
   - If you wish, you can edit it - software for editing is available in the University computer labs in the ERC and Percy Baxter centre (see http://www.studentit.unimelb.edu.au/)
   - once you have created your video you will need to download it (if using the flip video these plug straight into a computer/laptop via the integrated USB) onto a computer AND then upload it to the LMS
• Once you’ve uploaded it, delete it from the flip camera if you are using it (MAKE SURE YOU HAVE A COPY FIRST)
• You will need to contact ... to book the flip camera
• The flip cameras have a battery life of around 2 hours only - to recharge, they need to be plugged into a computer via the USB

Some links to help get you going

• Come si legge un film?
• How to make a short film with no budget and questionable talent
• Film techniques of Alfred Hitchcock
• How to make a movie

Criteria for assessment will include:

1. Portrayal of an episode which coheres with the film
2. Appropriacy and accuracy of language, including oracy
3. Creativity and originality

You will each receive an individual mark based on a group mark for the write-up and film, and an individual mark based on your on-screen performance

Due dates

1. I would like to see a proposal from each group by the end of week 8
2. Film and script will be due by the end of week 10
3. We will have a screening in week 12 of all films as our end of semester celebration...