Building a writing community through learning of French

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Recommended Citation

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This paper reports on a pilot study designed to develop writing proficiency in French via collaborative writing activities at intermediate level at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Twenty four students in the final year of French studies program took part in this innovative approach which integrates multimodal functionality of the e-learning platform combined with face to face interaction and discussions. Methodology draws on educational practice influenced by a socio-constructivist approach, and particularly on the importance of relevant meaningful tasks in the target language as well as 'constructively aligned' (Biggs, 1999: 11) assessment in language learning. The results show that groups used the online functionality to scaffold their writing skills and that collaborative tasks were perceived as an effective way of consolidating grammar knowledge and enhancing individual literacy skills in the foreign language. Qualitative analysis of students' evaluation of their writing skills at the beginning and the end of the semester shows that group work acts as activator in the meta-learning that was occurring online as well as in the face -to -face discussions resulting in critical reflection in the independent learning process.

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Keywords

collaborative learning, writing community, social constructivism, peer -learning, literacy skills

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Abstract

This paper reports on a pilot study designed to develop writing proficiency in French via collaborative writing activities at intermediate level at the University of Wollongong in Australia. Twenty-four students in the final year of the French-studies program took part in this innovative approach, which integrates the multimodal functionality of the e-learning platform with face-to-face interaction and discussions. The methodology draws on educational practice influenced by a socio-constructivist approach, and particularly on the importance of relevant, meaningful tasks in the target language as well as "constructively aligned" (Biggs 1999, p.11) assessment in language-learning. The results show that groups used the online functionality to scaffold their writing skills, and that collaborative tasks were perceived as an effective way of consolidating grammar knowledge and enhancing individual literacy skills in the foreign language. Qualitative analysis of students' evaluation of their writing skills at the beginning and the end of the semester shows that group work acted as an activator in the meta-learning occurring online as well as in the face-to-face discussions, resulting in critical reflection in the independent-learning process.

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Introduction

Language enrolments at the University of Wollongong have steadily increased since 2010 with the implementation of a compulsory language component in the Bachelor of International Studies. French and Spanish are among the two most studied languages. The first year of French studies is the entry point to a French major or minor; it assumes no previous knowledge of the language, and students frequently come from various faculties and educational backgrounds with different levels of proficiency, which can vary between zero and five years of language study.

In 2012 the Faculty of Arts reviewed its languages program and, following one of the recommendations, it streamlined face-to-face tuition hours in its undergraduate language provision. This new diet of reduced face-to-face teaching was implemented in 2013. In French, first-year students currently have four hours of weekly face-to-face contact time instead of the previous five. From 2014, second-year students will get three hours of weekly teaching instead of the current four hours. The cascading effect of these changes will affect the next cohort of students, who will arriving in their third year of French studies in 2015 with 16% less face-to-face tuition than their predecessors.

Consequently, the issue of increasing numbers of students with a range of proficiency and varying needs, compounded with limited resources for languages other than Asian languages – which the federal government has deemed "nationally strategic languages" (*The Australian* 5 February 2014) – is challenging us to rethink our approach to teaching and learning. A most appropriate strategy, from our own experience in Australia, has been to effectively integrate communication technologies, such as online forum discussions and blogs, into the first- and second-year French curricula, respectively, to support and enhance the student learning experience (Bissoonauth-Bedford & Stace 2012, Jones & Bissoonauth-Bedford 2008).

This paper reports on a case-study research project carried out in a French third-year class where computer technology was used to create a learning community in which students collaborated in a group writing task to develop and enhance their writing proficiency at an intermediate level. Collaboration in this sense refers to the "interaction among students as they work together towards a common goal" (Davin & Donato 2013, p.8). In the first part of the paper, we give a brief overview of research that has used a socio-constructivist approach to design online collaborative tasks. Second, we describe the methodology and structure of the task. Third, we share the analyses of students' perceptions of working together in creating an online writing community. And finally we suggest recommendations for extending the online collaborative experience to other modern languages.

Literature Review

Peregoy and Boyle (1997) have argued that language learners must develop a repertoire of both oral and written language skills to become fully proficient in a language and be able to participate in a full range of social and academic situations.

Social interaction among learners, Warschauer (1997, p.471) suggests, can promote "an environment to learn language, learn about language, and learn 'through' language". This form of social learning, which is also referred to as "social constructivism" (Laurillard 2009, p.10), draws from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) concept of collaborative learning: learning from interaction with more experienced others. From this perspective, social interaction allows less-advanced learners to achieve what they had not been able to do by themselves, and thus fill in the gaps in their "zone of proximal development". The term "scaffolding" is also used to describe this form of assistance. Gibbons and Hammond (2002) have argued that scaffolded learning in the form of social interaction and guidance by a more experienced learner is indeed key to cognitive development and successful learning.

Research on the impact of collaborative learning in foreign-language education has shown that in the main, students' language development benefits as a whole from working in groups. For example, online discussions have helped enrich oral discussions in high-school students of French (Kroonenberg 1995) and first-year university students' spoken and written proficiency in German (Chun 1994). Greater student participation was noted in online discussions together with improved quality in argumentation and writing skills in the foreign language (Kern 1995b; Sullivan & Pratt 1996; Warschauer 1996a). Although there may be some drawbacks to online group discussions, such as more difficulty in achieving consensus than in face-to-face discussions (Sproull & Kiesler 1991; Weisband 1992) and the risk of overload of messages for group members to process (Moran 1991), research generally has shown that the positive features far outweigh the negative ones.

The development of literacy skills in any language is a dynamic process (Kern 2000, p.16). Research on second-language literacy in particular shows it to be multi-dimensional, and the variability of results, it is argued, does not allow a comprehensive view that can inform the teaching of writing skills (Cumming 2001). Allen (2009, p.370), for instance, argues that writing in a foreign language is an advanced process that involves "multiple literacies", since students are often required to use several skills such as critical analysis of texts and a constructive knowledge of the language before they can engage in a writing process of their own. Empirical studies have shown that students have better scores when they work on speaking- and writing-related tasks (Hubert 2013), and that they are more likely to be motivated when they engage in areas of interest (Bruner 1985) and in activities that help them improve their language skills (Cordella & Normand-Marconnet 2011).

Research on collaborative writing, defined as "the joint production of a text by two or more writers" (Storch 2005, p.155), has mainly focused on the socio-cognitive processes at work in such interactions. In addition, the use of collaborative-writing tasks in second-language teaching appears to be scarce (Storch 2011). Moreover, existing studies have highlighted that students have mixed feelings and attitudes towards collaborative writing, and that thus it is one of the areas that require further investigation (Storch 2005).

Given that language-learning can be enhanced by peer interaction during group work, and the lack of studies in how students perceive collaborative writing, we decided to explore this issue. To this end, we designed a small-group task that would be novel and constructively aligned with our curriculum assessment to foster writing skills in French. It needs to be emphasised that the purpose of this paper is not about showing students' progress in writing in French, but rather whether peer collaboration was perceived as a stepping stone to aid writing in the foreign language.

Methodology

Context of study and curriculum

The design of the present collaborative writing task was guided by the following graduate attributes (Hoban et al. 2004) as set in the course subject outline: increasing students' knowledge of the French-speaking world and francophone cultures; further developing and enhancing students' language (oral and written proficiency) by using a variety of modes of communication; and applying foreign-language skills to a modern workplace environment.

The French course at third-year undergraduate level is aimed at further developing and enhancing proficiency in all four language skills, with specific emphasis on writing skills. Students are at level B1/B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, an international benchmark used to measure levels of attainment in the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening).
The multimedia possibilities of the language laboratories at the University of Wollongong allow access to on-line television and radio, and enable students to benefit from an internationalised curriculum to enhance their language-learning experience.
The aim is to get students to level B1+/B2+ by the end of the semester. The main objectives that frame the third year subject are:

- increased proficiency in oral communication by engaging in weekly group discussions and individual presentations;
- using French texts in print and online materials effectively to prepare for class activities and homework; and
- effectively using electronic modes of communication as well as multimedia resources on the online learning platform, Moodle. Since this was the first year that Moodle was being used, it was important to ensure that the teacher and students could use the new online environment efficiently and perceive its enhanced teaching and learning benefits.

The intermediate French-language curriculum focuses on the French-speaking world and francophone cultures. Three main aspects are covered in this topic: overview of the French-speaking world, "la francophonie" as a francophone movement and writings from the francophone world. The project examined in the current study was integrated into the curriculum in the form of a group writing task based on Nobel laureate J.M.G. Le Clézio's short story "L'enfant de sous le pont" (The child from under the bridge), and was formally assessed.

The features of the collaborative task used a socio-constructivist approach supported by technology, as outlined by Driscoll (2000, quoted in Gruba 2004, p.74 and Laurillard 2009, p.18), and were adapted as follows:

- Online forums and diaries were set up in the Moodle learning platform to give students online access to their work-group forum as well as individual diaries; this allowed them to post their work, comment on the work of others and seek help and clarification from other members or the teacher. The teacher could also access the group discussions and individual journals, but teacher input was kept to a minimum except when students had specific questions related to the task.
- While the forum provided students with a virtual space in which they could interact and collaborate, the individual diary encouraged them to keep track of their own progress and reflect on their language development. Students submitted their individual reflective summary with their group article as part of the formal assessment.
- The students in this research were randomly put into small groups of three (Appendix 3) to allow maximum interaction between members and peer support, or "peer-scaffolding", to occur (Davin & Donato 2013) with minimum teacher assistance as pointed out above.
- A "practice environment" of approximately 15 minutes was incorporated into the conventional weekly tutorial from weeks 2 to 6 to promote social learning in the class. The tutorials allowed students to ask the teacher questions about task instructions if something was unclear, and gave the groups regular planning and organising times to facilitate task completion with ease (Table 1).

Table 1: Task components to support collaborative writing

Task components	Collaborative environment
Introduction to task	Extract of J.M.G. Le Clézio's short story with comprehension questions studied in class.
Objective of task	Write a short story in groups in the form of a newspaper article as a follow-up to Le Clézio's "L'enfant de sous le pont" to enhance writing skills in French (Appendix 1).
Steps and processes aiding online scaffolding	The forum provided opportunities for online group work as well as individual work, and for keeping a written record of their interactions. There were very few constraints, to allow for maximum flexibility. Students could discuss in any language of their choice. Teacher support and guidance was available in face-to-face in tutorials as well as online.
Resources	Moodle site, electronic resources, library, peers and teacher.
Conclusion	Submit finished article in class to the teacher, one article per group.
Assessment (two pieces of writing in the target language)	1. Group article (all students in the group get the same mark). 2. Individual reflective summary.

4

Structure of the task

The writing task was scheduled in week 7 of the semester to allow students time to get settled into their groups and work on the task progressively from weekly lectures on "La Francophonie au 21e siècle" (Francophonie in the 21st century); follow-up tutorials on the same topic occurred from weeks 2 to 7. All 24 students had five weeks to complete the group writing task, which was based on a short story by Nobel laureate J.M.G. Le Clézio entitled "L'enfant de sous le pont". An extract from the story was given as reading comprehension homework in week 1 to complete for week 2.

In the week 2 tutorial, students worked in small groups on their comprehension answers. Going over the answers in class allowed students to share their understanding of the text and discuss it with peers. This is an efficient use of teacher's time, as one can move around the class giving clarification and specific attention where needed. This classroom format also allowed each group to provide a collective answer in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. This activity allowed instant feedback from the teacher on written language and peer correction of major linguistic errors. The two-hour tutorials are ideal for group work since they take place in the language laboratory, which is equipped with computers, and where students can work together as well as individually.

The group writing task, in the form of a newspaper article, was chosen as the majority of our students are enrolled in journalism and media studies, and would thus find it relevant and easier to transfer knowledge from other subjects. Furthermore, students in the third year of French studies are already familiar with the major French newspapers, as their second year of study covers current affairs in both the French audiovisual and print media. Although this was the first time that students had done this activity, instructions and guidelines were kept to a minimum, as the emphasis was on encouraging creativity and opportunities for students to explore ideas and work together on a finished newspaper article.

In the task instructions (Appendix 1), students were allowed to use both languages to communicate in the forum, although French was preferred in the spoken-language tutorials. For all the exchanges outside class, students could use either French or English. The newspaper article, however, had to be written in French, as it was a language-assessment task. Students were only required to present their story in the format of a French newspaper article with a title, an introductory brief, titles for each section and a conclusion. They were encouraged to use a variety of sources to gather information, such as face-to-face meetings, library books, journals and newspapers, and to understand that the Internet is not a panacea for research and academic work.

Students were required to show their group work in progress in the forum discussions. Online exchanges could include records of oral discussions as well as written plans, decisions, ideas and content development. The teacher's role was mainly one of a facilitator, and included checking whether students could access their forums and diaries in the new learning system and responding to students' queries.

The individual writing in the form of a reflective summary, which was based on the group work, specifically asked what decisions were made by the student, how they went about their writing and what lessons were learnt in the process. Students could use their online discussions or face-to-face meetings as illustrations to analyse and reflect on their progress.

The writing tasks were formally assessed with two objectives in mind. The first was to build a writing community through group work to support and enhance the writing of French. The second was to incorporate an element of reflection in the form of an individual report in which students

could use the target language to share their experience of working in groups and say whether they felt group work had helped them enhance their writing skills. Assignments need to be "constructively aligned" (Biggs 1999, p.11) so that they recognise, promote and reward critical reflection and active engagement.

Participants and data collection

All 24 students in the class participated in the study. Data was collected from online forum exchanges over the five weeks of task preparation, as well as from the individual reflective summaries that were submitted for this written assessment task.

In addition, at the end of the semester, a short survey (Appendix 2) asked students to evaluate their overall progress in French (question1), their confidence in writing in French (question 2) and which tasks they thought assisted in their learning of French (question 3).

Results

This study set out to explore how students perceived a group writing task and whether they believed it helped them in their learning. Analysis of the collected data is reported under three main themes:

1.   student evaluation of group work;
2.   student reflection on group work; and
3.   building a writing community online.

1.   *Student evaluation of group work*
1.1 Level of confidence in writing in French
Question 2 asked students to evaluate their overall level of confidence in writing in French on a scale of 0 to 4, where 0 represents "no improvement" and 4 "very good improvement". As the results below illustrate, all the students felt that their writing proficiency had improved to some extent by the end of the semester.

Table 2: Level of confidence in writing in French

Scale	Numbers (total =24)	Percentage (%)
0 = no improvement	0	0%
1= little improvement	2	8.3%
2= average improvement	11	45.8%
3 = good improvement	10	41.6%
4= very good improvement	1	4.1%

The majority of the students (46%) felt that their confidence in writing had improved to an average degree, closely followed by those who felt a "good improvement" in their level of confidence (42%). Since the question was a general one, student responses may have included other writing activities covered in the semester, such as translation in French and online written grammar quizzes, which they may have felt increased their confidence in writing.

1.2 Efficiency of group work in assisting learning

Question 3 requested that students evaluate the efficiency of the group task amongst other writing tasks covered in the semester. For the purpose of this paper, only data relating to the group task is analysed. As the results below show, the majority of students (71%) perceived the group writing

6

task as being helpful in assisting their learning of French, although 29% did not think that was the case. These results corroborate findings in the literature that students have mixed feelings about collaborative writing tasks (Storch 2005, p.155). Students' individual reports provide some answers as to problems encountered in group work, which may explain their reservations about it.

Table 3: Efficiency of group work

Scale	Numbers (total =24)	Percentage (%)
1 = least useful	4	16.6%
2= little useful	3	12.5%
3 = useful	7	29.1%
4= quite useful	8	33.3%
5= most helpful	2	8.3%

2. Student reflection on group work

The data gathered from individual reflective summaries relate to the group writing task, where students articulated a self-reflection in the target language on how they perceived the group work and their own language development, and what they learnt in the process. Students identified strategies and activities that aided their learning; this illustrates what Biggs (1985) referred to as meta-learning. An analysis of the qualitative data can be summarised under four main themes: task negotiation; knowledge-sharing and conceptualisation; connection between the formal and the virtual; and lessons learnt and problems encountered when working in groups. Responses are reported verbatim and have also been translated into English.

2.1 Task negotiation

The examples below illustrate how students got together to brainstorm ideas, negotiate who would do what and devise an action plan for the group. Some decided on a step-by-step approach in achieving cohesion of story and working as a team to complete the task (example 1).

> **Example 1**
>
> *Nous nous sommes retrouvées à la bibliothèque où nous avons décidé que nous voulions écrire un article qui ne finit pas bien. Ensuite on a résolu les idées principales de chaque paragraphe et on a décidé que chaque personne a dû [sic] écrire son paragraphe à la maison. Après nous avons corrigé notre paragraphe ensemble et ensuite nous avons essayé écrire les paragraphes afin qu'ils soient cohésifs.*
>
> *(We met at the library, where we decided that we wanted to write a story that did not end well. Then we decided on the main ideas of each paragraph and we decided that each person would write their paragraph at home. After that we corrected [each person's] paragraph together, and then we tried to write the paragraphs so that they are coherent.)*

Others divided the work amongst the team members, who worked individually, thus privileging expediency at the expense of more time spent on achieving a cohesive story (example 2).

> **Example 2**
>
> *Au début, on a décidé de collaborer sur les idées pour la rédaction, et puis Laura a conseillé qu'on divise la rédaction en trois parties et on les achève séparément. A mon avis, ça nous a aidé parce que c'était plus facile de passer des heures sur 200 mots à la place de 600 mots.*

7

> *(At the beginning we decided to collaborate on the ideas for the composition, and Laura recommended that we should divide the composition in three parts and complete them separately. In my view, it helped because it was easier to spend time on 200 words instead of 600 words.)*

2.2 Knowledge-sharing and conceptualisation

Some students reported on how they conceptualised the task by making connections and transferring knowledge from other subjects they were studying. In example 3, students reflected on how the group's writing was enhanced by additional knowledge and skills learnt in a journalism course. In addition, students also commented on the difficulty of engaging in online conversations and how the group work in the tutorials brought more positive outcomes.

> ### Example 3
>
> *C'était difficile de converser de manière significative sur le forum, donc la plupart de notre exchange [sic] des idées étaient en face à face. L'exemple de la classe était utile pour nous, et Alex a eu aussi l'information de son cours de journalisme.*
>
> *(It was difficult to have a significant conversation on the forum; that's why our exchange of ideas was face-to-face. The example in the class was useful to us, and Alex also had the information from her journalism course.)*

In example 4, students applied their knowledge from the Francophonie lectures to contextualise their story and give more credibility to their main character.

> ### Example 4
>
> *Quand nous avons écrit sur lui [Ali], j'ai choisi le Maroc en raison de son nom et aussi parce que nous étudions les pays francophone [sic]. J'ai cherché sur l'internet sur l'histoire des soldats marocains et j'ai découvert que la France a utilisé les gens de leurs colonies qui ont combat […] pour eux dans plusieurs guerres.*
>
> *(When we wrote about him [Ali], I chose Morocco because of his name and also because we study francophone countries. I searched the internet for the history of Moroccan soldiers and I found out that France used a lot of the people in its colonies to fight in several wars.)*

In example 5, students reflected on how they used a journalistic text studied in class on the topic of multilingualism in France to construct their group article.

> ### Example 5
>
> *Quand j'écrivais mon paragraphe j'ai relu l'article sur le multilinguisme de la classe et j'ai remarqué que la construction d'un article est très importante. Par exemple on commence avec un titre, puis le chapeau qui est un résumé du texte, suivant est le développement et finalement la conclusion.*
>
> *(When I was writing my paragraph, I reread the article on multilingualism seen in class and I noticed that the structure of an article is very important. For example, we start*

<div align="center">8</div>

with a title, the brief (which is a summary of the text), followed by the body of the text and finally a conclusion.)

2.3 Linking formal and virtual environments

Students reported on how their group went about achieving the task and the various strategies that they used in the building of their writing community. In example 6 below, students used the "practice environment" of the tutorials constructively to brainstorm ideas, which were then written online and sent to the group for comments.

> ### *Example 6*
> *Nous avons eu la chance de partager des idées créatives et faire du brainstorming en classe. Avec l'aide de Moodle, nous pouvions nous assurer que nous travaillions sur la même longueur d'onde et qu'il n'y avait pas d'erreurs grammaticales.... Il y avait une division juste du travail et la chance de la vérification de notre écriture par une autre personne.*
>
> *(We were lucky to be able to share ideas and do brainstorming in class. With the help of Moodle, we could ensure that we were on the same wavelength and that there were no grammatical errors.... Work was shared equally and [there was] the opportunity to have someone to check our writing.)*

The online interactions enabled students to check each other's work, give feedback and prepare effectively for follow-up discussions. This in turn allowed scaffolding of the next stage of the task, with the added advantage of having someone to check and give feedback on the new piece of writing (example 7).

> ### *Example 7*
> *Cependant le problème avec notre méthode était la question de l'uniformité sur tout l'article, par exemple des renseignements concernant notre histoire ont été changés après l'écriture. Le forum de Moodle m'a aidé grandement à cet égard, pour comparer nos contributions individuelles. En outre, le forum était très utile pour donner ses réactions au groupe et développer les nouvelles idées.*
>
> *(However, the problem with our method was the question of uniformity of the article; for example, details concerning our [part] of the story were changed after writing. The forum in Moodle helped me a lot in this respect for comparing our individual contributions. Moreover, the forum was very useful for reactions to the group and developing new ideas.)*

2.4 Lessons learnt and problems encountered when working with others

Students identified strategies and activities that aided their learning, as well as problems encountered when working in a group. In a similar fashion to students' comments in example 3, their comments in example 8 also highlight the difficulty of getting members of the team to engage online, and suggest that face-to-face discussions may be better when working in small groups. These types of problems may have contributed towards mixed feelings or less positive attitudes towards group work (Table 3).

> ### *Example 8*
>
> *Si je pouvais faire la rédaction encore une fois j'essaierais de passer plus de temps en face à face, au lieu de communiquer via le forum. C'était difficile quand par exemple je leur ai demandé une question et ils ont pris un ou deux jours pour une réponse.*

(If I had to do the writing assignment again, I would spend more time on face-to-face instead of communicating via the forum. It was difficult when, for example, I asked them a question and they took one or two days to answer.)

In example 9, students commented on a range of new skills learnt in the process of collaborating with others on a task (consolidation of knowledge, improving one's listening skills in the target language and developing new ways of thinking).

Example 9

Malgré toutes les difficultés, le travail collectif permet aussi de produire des performances supérieures. Cela m'a permis d'améliorer mon français car nos discussions étaient en français et de développer ma mémoire auditive. Les débats m'ont aussi aidé à réfléchir aux thèmes que je n'aurais pas pu envisager seule.

(In spite of all the difficulties, collective work allows the production of better-quality work. It allowed me to improve my French and develop my listening skills. The discussions also helped me think about topics that I would not have chosen by myself.)

3. Building a writing community in French

Data from forum discussions further illustrate features of socio-cognitive processes at work in the building of a learning community, such as peer assistance, peer-scaffolding and constructive feedback to allow successful completion of tasks.

3.1   Peer assistance

Example 10 shows students constructing their stories by helping each other with formatting issues and providing grammatical feedback on each other's writing.

Example 10

Group B Newspaper Template

Kelly

Hey guys,

So I am still going over the grammar etc [sic], but I have been fiddling around with a newspaper template for the final presentation. Obvs we should be able to mess around with it a bit more on Tuesday, but I have attached what I have come up with so far.

_____

Laura

Hi everyone,

I've put in a template. Chels and I couldn't get your one to open on my computer so I just used one from publisher. See what you guys think. I don't know where we can fit the quotes in! I couldn't work out how to cut the pages we don't need so just ignore and I will print out the ones we need.

10

_____

Chelsea

Hey, I'm not sure its [sic] just on my screen but the part under Fagin et son protégé has disappeared for the first two columns, other than that looks good :-)

May be [sic] we could just resize the opening paragraph text box so that there isn't white space below it and then put the quotes or just a couple of words describing the man from both the prosecution and defence at the side.

Oh also just noticed.

*It should be L'oeuvre d'art **que** l'homme a volé not L'oeuvre d'art **qui** l'homme a volé.*

_____

3.2 Peer-scaffolding and constructive feedback
Examples 11 and 12 show students creating their stories by providing constructive feedback on each other's pieces of writing and working as a team to complete the task successfully.

Example 11

Group C The Draft

Alexandra

Ok, here is my translation. I am not sure how I went so it would be great if you guys could look over it. There is one part I'm not sure about, where I've written

J'ai su que l'eau glacée et l'alcool me finir (?)

Where I'm trying to get across that he knew the alcohol and the water would finish him but I don't know if it translates??

Anyway, here's the rest. Thanks guys!

_____

Sophie

Hi guys,

I have made changes and cut a fair bit out as it is still over the limit. Can you find any other cuts?

I have changed the statistique bit, and added 'de plus' as in 'more' is this also 'one more'– not sure.

The water and grog killing him I think is 'serait le fin de moi'- as it says something like this in the dictionnaire.

11

Any other cuts would be great. See you guys tomorrow.

_____

Liam

Hey guys, here's my section and the captions.... I've put corrections/readjustments in red. Let me know what you think/if any confuse you. I'll attach the document as well. Read it over and critique it because it probably needs it. I'm willing to do the fact box too but I can't remember if anyone else is doing it.

_____

Example 12

Group G Last 2 questions and chapeau

Stephanie:

Tom, The finished chapeau is wonderful! The answers you've written look good as well. I think you've really captured Ali's personality and the story in the way we were discussing. There are a couple of spelling mistakes and words with the incorrect article for gender. But I think it would be easier if we could just do all final editing stuff at our meeting on Wednesday. Otherwise, I don't think you need to change anything.

_____

Tom

I agree Stephanie! The chapeau was done wonderfully, and really captured the essence of the story. Just one thing – are we missing one of the questions? There is the chapeau, then the 1st 3 questions which are Steph's and then there are only 2 questions? The one asking if Ali had learned anything and then the second one being difficulties that Ali faces.

_____

Mia

Tom and Steph, I've added to our group rédaction with my questions. I am more than open to suggestion, so if I have errors (which I am sure there are many), please let me know and I'll make adjustments accordingly.

Discussion of Results and Wider Implications

As pointed out by Macaro (2001, p.43), strategies used by students to carry out tasks are difficult to observe, measure and record. This is why we focused on students' perceptions of the group task and what, in their view, aided their language learning, with a focus on writing skills. The results showed that in completing the group writing task, students saw strengths and weaknesses in each

12

other as well as themselves, and that they viewed their language development favourably, as illustrated by the individual reflective summaries and forum exchanges.

The reflective summaries' analysis revealed that in some cases there was evidence of development of new cognitive function by internalising language structures mentally and sharing conceptual understanding with the group. Examples 3, 4 and 5 clearly demonstrate that what had been done in class offered prompts and scaffolding features for the structure and type of text that was required.

The results illustrate that although social learning is more informal and flexible than formal learning in the classroom, activities that allow students to make connections between both environments have a real impact on improving writing skills and can be applied to other modern languages. The following paragraphs outline three suggestions for adaptation of this model for application in other languages.

First, since the nature of the group writing task leans towards Chamot and O'Malley's cognitively demanding tasks (1987, p.238), in which learners must use multiple literacy skills such as listening, comprehension, speaking and critical reading, it is crucial to integrate group work into the curriculum so that students realise its overall value and importance. Setting groups in Moodle and keeping personal diaries require careful planning and effective use of technology, as they are multi-step processes. An illustrated summary with instructions of how to set groups in Moodle is available in Appendix 3.

Second, it should be noted that although a short story provided a fruitful point of entry for a group task, any text could be used as a model. The integration of collaborative work related to the task in the weekly tutorial showed the importance the teacher gave to this activity. It also gave students the opportunity to ask the teacher for clarification and build their writing community based on exchanges from class discussions and the online learning environment.

Third, the teacher's request to use French in class was respected most of the time. However, this was not seen as a constraint, since less advanced students did not feel left out because they contributed their ideas more in English than in French – although French was preferred in class. The more advanced peers in the group were able to offer assistance and scaffold language solutions in the context of the interactions. A further implementation of this model, at more advanced levels, could require the sole use of the target language in the online discussions.

Perhaps one of the complex features of collaborative writing is its formal assessment. Since it is difficult to assess individual contributions in group work, we devised a reflective summary in the target language as a legitimate way to assess students' evaluation of working in groups and the development of their literacy skills in French. Thus, the reflective summary complemented the group work and allowed us to assess students' progress in a range of activities. On the other hand, individual reports in the target language achieved a specific purpose for a specific audience, since what students said about the task was important information to evaluate how successfully the task had achieved its aims. More importantly, in doing so students shared their experiences by using the language in an academic context, thus demonstrating their level of proficiency and development of literacy skills in French.

Conclusion

13

In this study, we set out to design a group writing task as well as to gather student feedback about group work. This was a novel activity since it allowed students to build a writing community online by working together in the target language. The group task was in the form of a newspaper article, and evaluation consisted of a survey at the end of the semester. Student reflection was in the form of an individual report on the group work. The collaborative writing activity was a novel experience in our institution, since in the previous years writing tasks at third-year level had always been individually based.

Student evaluation of group work was generally positive, although there was evidence of mixed attitudes towards the efficiency of group work in enhancing language skills. The reservations expressed by some students suggest that such an activity needs to be implemented with careful and regular class preparation. Student reflections revealed that group work provided opportunities to consolidate classroom discussions with online interactions. In terms of language-learning, group work enabled students to give and receive feedback on their writing and use concepts learnt from other subjects. In addition, students were introduced to a different form of interaction than the one they had been used to in previous years. Thus, from the results of this semester-long study, it can be argued that social interaction among learners can promote "an environment to learn language, learn about language, and learn 'through language'", as stated by Warschauer (1997, p.471).

In conclusion, although this sample is small, it should be remembered that this was a pilot study conducted over one semester. Further research needs to be carried out using the same methodology and procedure with students in intermediate French in other Australian universities to test the effectiveness of group work in enhancing writing proficiency. Nonetheless, this model is flexible enough to be adapted to other modern-language programs that aim to enhance the literacy skills of students at the intermediate level.

14

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16

17

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Appendix 1

Fren351 Written Assignment (weighting 15%) to hand in week 7 on Thursday 18 April in class

1. **Rédaction 1 (approx. 600 words)** (**weighting 10%**) is a creative writing exercise in the form of a newspaper article (**in French**) to be carried out in groups. Each group is required to keep an online Story Forum (in English or French) which is housed in Moodle to show their work in progress. The Group Forum should include written records of interactions, discussions, decisions, and content development. The tutor will check the Forums on a regular basis to follow progression and make comments, if necessary.

    Rédaction1 (environ 600 mots)

    Une dizaine d'années plus tard…

    Ali a gardé avec lui 'l'enfant de sous le pont' et il a pris soin d'elle. Un(e) journaliste découvre toute l'histoire et la raconte. Il/Elle explique aussi en quoi et pourquoi la vie d'Ali a changé: responsabilités qui l'amènent à cesser de boire, à trouver plus d'argent, un toit pour la petite fille ainsi qu'une certaine dignité humaine…

    En groupe écrivez un article structuré en le présentant avec un titre, un chapeau et des sous titres pour chaque partie de votre histoire. Vous pouvez intégrer des témoignages d'Ali ou d'autres personnes dans votre histoire, si vous le souhaitez.

    2. Individual Report (approx. 300 words) (weighting 5%)
    The individual report (rapport individuel) is a reflective summary based on group activities of Rédaction 1 and will be in **French**. Students can refer to the Group Forum discussions for this report. The report may include for example: how students went about their writing in groups, decisions made by the student and what lessons were learnt in the process.

18

Appendix 2

End of semester Evaluation

Program of Study (Major):   Name (Optional):

1. How do you evaluate your language skills in French after this first semester?

1= weak   5= excellent

Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5

2. How do you judge your level of confidence in writing in French? Please rank on a scale of 0 to 4 with 0 = 'no improvement' and 4 = 'very good improvement'.

0: no improvement

1: little improvement

2: average improvement

3: good improvement

4: very good improvement

3. Which of these items below, in your view, assisted in your learning of French this session? Please rank them on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 = least helpful and 5 = most helpful.

1= least useful   5= most useful

19

Rédaction de groupe	1	2	3	4	5
Reflective summary	1	2	3	4	5
Translation into French	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar revision & practice	1	2	3	4	5
Weekly Oral conversation	1	2	3	4	5

Merci beaucoup et bonnes vacances!

Appendix 3

GROUP SETTINGS IN MOODLE

Making activities and resources available to groups of students in Moodle is a multi-step process. There are two components: the group and the grouping. A group is a set of *n* students. A grouping is a set of *n* groups, so a grouping could consist of one group, two groups or many groups. To establish groups with random membership from the student cohort, the process shown in Figure 1 below was used. This divides the student membership into as many groups of three students as can be made while using a letter-naming convention – Naming scheme = Group @ creates letter groups, so Group A, Group B etc.

Figure 1

As Moodle uses groupings to allocate students to activities, groupings then needed to be created using the process shown in Figure 2, and groups were added to the grouping using the process shown in Figure 3.
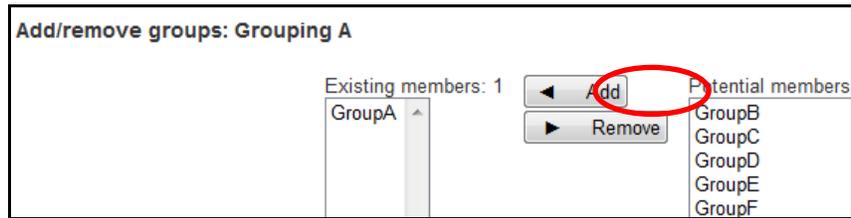
Figure 2

21

Figure 3

Finally, the grouping is allocated to an activity, in this case a Forum, and then made available (visible) only to members of that grouping using the process shown in Figure 4 below. The outcome is that each group had its own private forum space in which to communicate and collaborate on the writing activity.
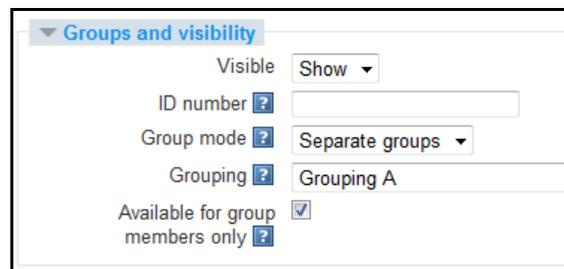

Figure 4

22