

Investigating the influence of group work on  
creativity, motivation and writing achievement

The case of Second Year Students at the department  
of Letters and English, University Frères Mentouri,  
Constantine 1

□ أثر العمل الجماعي على الإبداع والتحفيز والتحقيق الكتابي  
دراسة حالة طلبة السنة الثانية في قسم الآداب واللغات جامعة الإخوة  
منتوري قسنطينة

Lamia ELMECHTA\*,  
INATAA,UFMC, Constantine1  
lamia.elmechta@umc.edu.dz

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**Abstract:**

One of the major targets of the reform that the Algerian educational system, notably higher education, has witnessed during the last decade is to achieve autonomy in learning. This latter can be well attained by the policy of collaborative, cooperative or, in simple words, group work. Regarding foreign language learning, group work has, recently, gained a wide popularity. In this context, the present work aims at investigating the effects of group work on creativity, motivation, and EFL writing achievement. Group work was hypothesized to enhance second year students' creativity and motivation, and was predicted to improve their writing achievement. In testing this hypothesis, an observational study was applied to a sample of seventy students studying at the department of Letters and English, University Frères Mentouri, Constantine 1, and a questionnaire was administered. Concerning the results of the observation, group work results were found more significant, basically in producing creative content, in increasing the students' motivation, as well as in making less grammar and punctuation mistakes. Regarding the results of the questionnaire, most of the respondents (nearly 90%) were proved to support the idea

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\* Author correspondent

of group work in learning and creativity, in increasing motivation, as well as in improving writing achievement.

**Keywords:** Group work; creativity; intelligence; motivation; writing achievement

### ملخص:

إن أحد الأهداف الرئيسية للإصلاح التي شهدتها النظام التعليمي في الجزائر ولا سيما قطاع التعليم العالي خلال العقد الماضي هو تحقيق الاستقلال الذاتي في التعلم، ويمكن تحقيق هذا الأخير على أحسن وجه من خلال سياسة العمل التعاوني أو بكلمات بسيطة العمل الجماعي، أما فيما يخص تعلم اللغات الأجنبية فقد اكتسب العمل الجماعي شعبية واسعة مؤخراً، و من خلال هذا السياق ، يهدف العمل الحالي إلى دراسة أثر العمل الجماعي على الإبداع والتحفيز والتحقيق الكتابي في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية، حيث افترضنا أن العمل الجماعي يعزز الإبداع لدى طلبة السنة الثانية و يزيد من تحفيزهم كما يساهم في تحسين مستواهم الكتابي، وفي اختبار هذه الفرضية قمنا بأخذ عينة تحتوي على سبعين طالباً في قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية جامعة الإخوة منتوري قسنطينة 1، وأجرينا وسيلتين الاستبيان و الملاحظة، فيما يتعلق بنتائج الملاحظة ، تم العثور على أن نتائج العمل الجماعي كانت أحسن، أقل أخطاء وأكثر إبداعاً كما كان الطلبة أكثر تحفيزاً ، أما بالنسبة لنتائج الإستبيان، أثبت معظم المجيبين (حوالي 90٪) أنهم يدعمون فكرة العمل الجماعي في التعلم والإبداع وفي زيادة الحافز، وكذلك في تحسين كتاباتهم في اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العمل الجماعي- الإبداع - الذكاء - التحفيز - التحقيق الكتابي.

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## Introduction

During the 21 century, the Algerian educational system, and basically higher education, felt the need of a reform due to the rapid change triggered by technology that had taken place worldwide. Algerian universities have sought to achieve a good quality in higher education through the recently adopted system, that is, the LMD system. The main target is to develop the students' competence through integrating them in the learning environment and, hence, achieving a real practice of active instruction. Competence is viewed according to the LMD system, in terms of three principles: knowledge, skill, and attitude<sup>1</sup>. These principles that are believed to better lead to autonomy in learning can be well attained by group work. From the language teaching/learning perspective, group work is a technique of the communicative approach that has emerged in recent years (since the 1970s) to become widespread in current language teaching practices, mainly for the challenge of large class size.

In this paper, we will focus on an aspect of group work which is its application in a foreign language classroom. Three variables will be studied: creativity that is a facet of intelligence; motivation which is the second psychological factor after intelligence; and writing achievement that is a factor of language learning achievement.

### 1. Review of the literature

#### 1.1. Communicative language teaching:

In traditional language classrooms, the learning process was noticed to be very controlled by the teacher. This latter represented the authority in the classroom by being the only source of knowledge. No active role was expected from the part of learners during the process of learning, except the automatic processing of input. Similarly, language learning was seen at the level of grammatical competence and was linked with habit formation. More explicitly, learning was a result of practicing correct sentences. Mistakes had to be avoided because of controlled practice (e.g. memorization of drills). (Richards, 2006)

The failure of traditional approaches and methods of language teaching to provide satisfactory learning outcomes has led to the emergence of a new approach that is referred to as the communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT). CLT appeared in the 1970s to provide a novel teaching methodology that centers communication as its primary concern. This approach argues that communication provides better opportunities for language learning. Richards (2006) highlighted a set of principles for this approach: the main teaching goal is achieving successful communication through building communicative competence<sup>1</sup>; learners mistakes are viewed as

a sign of building their communicative competence, so they should be tolerated; fluency and accuracy should both be of concern; the four skills should be given equal importance and should be taught together as they appear in the real world.

Classroom activities proposed in CLT have given new roles for both teachers and learners. A shift has gone from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Similarly, the teaching approach has changed from individualistic to cooperative. In other words, learners are believed to learn better and feel more comfortable when they listen to their peers in group work activities rather than relying on the teacher as the authority in the classroom. Teachers have become more facilitators and monitors, and learning responsibility has been put on the learners (Richards, 2006). A clarification of the concept of group work is provided below.

### **1.2. Group work:**

The idea of group work has shifted the attention of educationists in the 1970s. After a decade, the teacher-talking time was decreased to be replaced by learners-talking time. There was a belief that learners who take the initiative in learning tend to learn better than those who rely on the teacher to acquire knowledge (Nunan & Lamb 1996). The idea of group work has taken insights from Vygotsky's theory of social learning (1978) that considers learning as an outcome of socialization, and that co-operating with others who know, somehow, more improves achievement.

#### **1.2.1. Definition of group work:**

Group work is defined by Johnson and Smith (1991) as a co-operative activity, during which students share aims and responsibilities to accomplish a task assigned by the teacher in groups or in pairs. (Cited in Beebe & Masterson, 2003)

#### **1.2.2. Making a group work:**

One aspect of group selection is determining the group size. This latter is a very important procedure that should be considered attentively by teachers before starting an instruction. A small group is often advised to reach learning objectives. The number of groups varies according to researchers. Some researches (e.g. Csernica et al., 2002) propose a group of three or four members as a better selection, while others (e.g. Davis, 1993) consider four to five members in a group as the best, for they provide more exchange of ideas and creativity. However, large groups are not advisable, as they decrease the opportunity for their members to participate and, hence, reduce active learning (Beebe & Masterson, 2003).

Another aspect of selection is assigning the members of the group. This is also considered as a primary step as it contributes to the success of the group. There are different viewpoints concerning this aspect. Some researchers (e.g. Davis, 1993) prefer heterogeneous grouping, believing that different capabilities will assemble and all the group members will benefit from this variety. Others (e.g. Connery, 1988, Beebe & Masterson, 2003) are in support of homogeneous grouping as equal performance levels, academic strengths and weaknesses are already known. There is another type of group selection that is self selected groups. This latter is done by the learners themselves choosing each other to form desired groups. However, this type is not very recommended (Cooper, 1990) as the learners concern will be on exchanging social interests rather than focusing on the course objectives.

### **1.2.3. Advantages of group work:**

In comparison to individual work, group work is believed to have a number of advantages. Beebe and Masterson (2003) summarized six advantages for group work. They stated that more information is provided by the group than by individuals because of sharing different experiences and backgrounds; group work increases creativity; the group members tend to retain information and, hence, achieve better learning; learners involved in the group tend to be more satisfied with the provided information than those who receive it in other techniques; group work gives the opportunity for learners to better understand themselves; it also develops interpersonal skills. Similarly, Harmer (1991) speculates that group work facilitates the learning environment by providing a more relaxed atmosphere. In addition, Raja (2012) advocated that group work stimulates the learners' autonomy and gives the opportunity to practically experience each others' ideas and, hence, provides the opportunity for more active learning where even slow learners interact and exchange ideas.

### **1.2.4. Group work and intelligence:**

Current definitions of intelligence go beyond traditional notions that link it to a single capacity that is known as IQ<sup>2</sup>. Howard Gardner (1983, in Gardner, 2011) and Robert Sternberg (1985) are contemporary psychologists who view intelligence in relation to a variety of capabilities. According to Gardner (1983, in Gardner, 2011), there are at least seven human intelligences, namely: logical-mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence.

Gardner (1983, in Gardner, 2011) argued that the seven abilities require varying between different ways of teaching in the classroom.

Since our concern in the present article is one type of intelligence that is interpersonal intelligence, the concept will be tackled exclusively. Regarding this type of intelligence, a set of activities can be used in the classroom to stimulate it. Group work is considered an example (Armstrong, 2009). Group work is referred to by Armstrong as cooperative learning activity where learners exchange ideas, solve problems, and discuss topics collaboratively. Cooperative learning (or group work) is considered an innovation in education since it promotes learners' cooperative skills and fosters learning outcomes.

#### **1.2.4.1. Group work and creativity:**

Creativity is defined by Sternberg (1985) as finding new solutions to old problems or as generating novel ideas. Similar to Gardner (1983), Sternberg (1985) identified three types of intelligence that go beyond IQ level: analytical, practical and creative. He (Sternberg, 1985) states that analytical intelligence is measured by IQ tests; practical intelligence can be illustrated by social intelligence; and creative intelligence can be demonstrated by novelty.

Creativity that is an aspect of intelligence (Sternberg, 1985) is argued to be stimulated by group work. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that two heads are better than one head. This means when learners work in groups, different minds interfere through exchanging different ideas. Adding one idea to another one would result in bringing a novel and creative idea. According to Harmer (1991), providing a relaxed learning environment by group work pushes learners to bring the best they have got and sorts out their creativity. Another proponent for the positive effect of group work on creativity is Sebbunga (2003, in Denis, 2009) who speculated that group work helps learners to build confidence and makes them able to discover their creativity potentials, and hence, develops their personality.

#### **1.2.4.2. Group work and motivation:**

Motivation refers to the driving force to accomplish desired goals. In second language acquisition, Gardner (1985) defines it as a combination of effort and desire to learn a foreign language and to have a positive attitude towards language learning.

The effect of group work on motivation has also drawn the attention of SLA research. Researchers (e.g. Kundo & Tutto, 1989) believed that group work is a source of intrinsic motivation, as the majority of learners consider it as fun. Group work provides the opportunity for learners to work together and share suggestions, insights, feedback about success and failure. They further advocated that the classroom where the teacher is dominant kills the learners' motivation.

Similarly, Ellis (1994) averred that learners working in groups are more motivated and are likely more engaged in any task that requires

speaking. Harmer (1991) added that group work allows students to work and, hence, facilitates learning. Furthermore, it was also argued (Gower, 1987, in Raja, 2012) to enhance various types of interaction and provides a more relaxed and cooperative classroom atmosphere that itself increases learners' motivation. Additionally, Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1998) advocated that the application of group work in writing activities decreases the learners' anxiety and increases their self confidence in comparison to individual work, which are other affective factors in addition to motivation.

### **1.2.4.3. Group work and writing:**

When dealing with writing, we are concerned with two aspects: academic writing and writing achievement. A clarification of the terms is first required. Academic writing is defined as an activity "that implies great effort to construct coherent and well argued texts whose production is difficult for the writer, but easier for the reader...(it) encompasses a range of approaches and types of practice for it that requires various techniques to train student writers". (Bednar & Jordan, in Robayo Luna & Hernandez Ortiz, 2013, p. 132)

Writing achievement can be defined as the outcome or the end result of a written production whether is a paragraph or a text. In this paper, two criteria will be considered in measuring writing achievement: grammatical accuracy and correct punctuation.

The previous quote is directly linked to the study objective which is group work. Robayo Luna & Hernandez Ortiz (2013) illustrated a variety of techniques that should be used to train students in writing. Group work is considered as a useful technique, as group discussion provides opportunities for learners to interact in English by clarifying ideas, rephrasing, and giving useful feedback, which develops ideas and, therefore, improves learning outcomes (Roberts, 2013). Research findings (in Roberts, 2013) showed that texts produced by groups were better in comparison to individual texts in terms of task fulfillment, grammatical accuracy, and complexity.

Similarly, the process of planning, which is an important step in successful writing, can be very motivating to students working in groups (Roberts, 2013). Roberts (2013) provided some activities of group work for the writing process. One activity is brainstorming; this latter makes a rich mind-map that comes from individuals collaborating with each other. Another example is to suggest a topic by an individual, then the students sit in a circle and the topic passes through them, each one writes an idea which was not proposed by a previous one and corrects the language if necessary. The result is an organized, accurate and creative paper that answers all the necessary

questions of the proposed topic. Widdowson (as cited, in Robayo Luna & Hernandez Ortiz, 2013) added that group work fosters decision making in learners because of the constant feedback that is shared among the group.

## **2. Methods and Materials:**

### **2.1. Subjects:**

Seventy subjects (58 girls and 12 boys) were involved in the study. Two groups were randomly drawn from the population of second year at the department of Letters and English, university Frères Mentouri-Constantine 1. The grouping of the participants had already been made by the administration. The first group comprising 35 students (7 boys and 33 girls) was taken as the experimental group, where the students were instructed to work in groups of four members for the belief that a group of four member is considered the best for promoting creativity (Csernica et al., 2002; Davis, 1993); the second group including 35 students (5 boys and 30 girls) was considered as the control group, where the subjects performed the task individually.

### **2.2. Materials and procedure:**

#### **2.2.1. The observation:**

As far as writing is concerned, an assignment in the module of Grammar was given to the students where they were instructed to apply the four types of the conditional 'if': type 0, type 1, type 2, and type 3 in writing a creative chain story<sup>3</sup>. For the experimental group, the students (35 students) were asked to work in groups of four members to produce the chain story, while for the control group, the participants (35 students) worked individually.

Concerning the use of observation as the research tool, three criteria were taken into consideration: the students' motivation, their level of creativity, and their writing achievement. As far as motivation is concerned, mainly intrinsic motivation was taken into consideration (Gardner, 1985). This type of motivation was determined by the observation of the students' degree of interest, their enjoyment, their efforts in accomplishing the task, as well as their interaction (Kundo & Tutto, 1989). Creativity was measured by bringing novel ideas (Sternberg, 1985), and the logical link between the consequence of the previous condition with the condition of the second consequence (c.f. definition of chain story). The third criterion that is writing outcomes was determined by the observation of the students' writing productions. Two aspects were considered: accuracy and punctuation (Peha, 2002).

### **2.2.2. The questionnaire:**

At the end of the writing task, a questionnaire was administered to the experimental group to investigate the learners' attitudes towards group work. Ten questions were grouped under three main sections: group work and foreign language learning (3 questions); group work and writing achievement, including grammar (4 questions); and group work and creativity (3 questions). Some questions were left open (e.g. how does group work affect writing achievement) so to check whether the arguments used by the participants are similar or different.

## **3. Results and discussion :**

### **3.1. The observation results:**

As has been mentioned earlier, in the observation of group work, three main criteria were considered: the students' motivation, their creativity, and their writing achievement. Concerning the first criterion, the students in the experimental group were observed to be totally engaged in the task. All of them were enjoyed while exchanging ideas and interacting with each other. Their main interest was to produce the best or the most creative chain story. Similarly, cooperation between the students in one group was shown to decrease their anxiety and increase their confidence when they exchanged ideas and when they applied rules of the conditional. On the contrary, the majority of the students in the control group were less motivated; they did not enjoy the task and considered it too demanding, especially that it was required from them to apply the four types of the conditional in one chain story. One can say that the observation results add evidence to past research on the positive influence of group work on: intrinsic motivation (Kundo & Tutto, 1989); interaction (Gower, 1987, in Raja, 2012); and increasing confidence (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998).

As for the second criterion, creativity, the findings of group work showed very creative chain stories in terms of the novelty of the produced ideas in comparison to individual work. In other words, the ideas of the stories written in the experimental group were impressive and innovative; however, the students in the control group presented very common and redundant ideas. Similarly, the logical link between the condition part and the consequence part was much better for group work than individual work. These findings, as well, add evidence to past research on the link between group work and creativity (Vygotsky, 1978; Harmer, 1991; Denis, 2009)

The relationship between group work and writing achievement was also proved in this study. The chain stories produced by groups were shown to be more grammatically accurate than those written by individual students in terms of the correct use of the four situations of the conditional and other grammatical aspects (e.g. tenses, articles,

prepositions, etc.). Group stories were also observed with less punctuation mistakes than those produced individually. Similar to the two previous criteria, the findings of this study confirm the positive influence of group work on developing the writing skill.

### **3.2. The questionnaire results:**

It has been mentioned previously that the administered questionnaire contained three main sections: group work and foreign language learning; group work and writing achievement (including grammar); and group work and creativity.

Concerning the results of the first section, almost all the respondents (31 students or approximately 94%) admit that group work does have a positive influence on learning English as a foreign language. Most of the given arguments state that group work decreases anxiety and increases confidence; it gives the chance to less able learners to speak with their peers in the group and, consequently, enhances their learning. The subjects' points of view of group work go hand in hand with researchers views basically in the aspects of decreasing anxiety and increasing confidence (e.g. Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1998) , which adds evidence to the effective role of cooperative work in learning English as a foreign language.

Regarding the relationship between group work and writing achievement, a very high percentage (89% corresponding to 31 students) showed that the former does have a positive effect on the latter. The students explain that if a student, unconsciously, makes a grammatical or punctuation mistake, s/he will be corrected by the other members of the group, so the paper will have more chance to be corrected by more than one person before it is finally handed in. as a consequence, the paper is expected to be more accurate than the one produced individually. These findings add other evidence to previous findings on group work and improving writing outcomes (e.g. Roberts, 2013).

As for the effect of group work on creativity, also a large number of students (29 students or approximately 83%) do show a positive attitude. They argue that if each student shares his/her idea, the whole group will come up with many ideas at the end; in this way, creativity will increase. Very few respondents (17%) claim that creativity is subject to the individual himself/ herself; and that if students impose their ideas on each other, they will distract each others' creativity. The high percentage goes hand in hand with the idea that two heads are better than one head (Vygotsky, 1978), and that creativity is sorted out as a result of the relaxing environment that group work provides (Harmer, 1991).

**CONCLUSION:**

The present work has provided empirical evidence on the effects of group work on learning English as a foreign language. Three main factors were the focal areas of the study: group work and motivation, group work and writing achievement, and group work and creativity.

The examination of the students' questionnaire and classroom observation shows that the results of the two research instruments go in the direction of the research hypothesis of the influence of group work on learning in general, and creativity and writing achievement in particular. In other words, the students' answers of the questionnaire support the findings of classroom observation, and the results of classroom observation agree with those of the questionnaire, and both of them support the good effects of group work on:

- enhancing writing achievement by peer correction;
- increasing creativity by sharing ideas;
- and in improving learning outcomes by engaging learners and increasing their motivation.

The effects of group work on motivation, creativity and writing achievement would provide stronger evidence if associated with an experimental design, which will open the door for future investigations.

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### **Margins**

- three competences are centered in the LMD system : knowledge, skill and attitude (arrêté 711, 712 for the LMD system)
- Communicative competences involves learning different aspects of language: how to use the language for different purposes and functions; how to use the language in different settings (e.g. formal and informal speech, written or spoken communication) ; how to understand different genres of texts; how to use different communication strategies when there is limitation in one's communicative abilities. (Richards, 2006)
- <sup>2</sup> Intelligence quotient
- <sup>3</sup> A chain story of the conditional is producing chain sentences when the second part of the first sentence (consequence) will be the cause of the first part of the second sentence (if I drink too much coffee, I will not sleep at night ; If I don't sleep at night, I will have a headache in the morning, ...)