



Exploring the impact of a group dynamics training activity on learner engagement during online classes of French as a foreign language

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the impact of introducing a Group Dynamics Training Activity (GDTA) on learners' reported engagement during the course. The context is a university Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) B2 French language online course over the course of two semesters. Data was collected in the form of online surveys during the semester prior to the introduction of the GDTA and during the semester when it was administered. This case study uses quantitative analysis of Likert-scale question responses and qualitative analysis of open fields in the questionnaires using a content analysis methodology. Results indicate that the GDTA had a positive impact on learners, particularly on the social and cognitive dimension of learner engagement.

Keywords: collaboration, engagement, affective, cognitive, social, online.

1. Introduction

The Centre for Modern Languages (CIM) at the Open University of Catalonia offers fully online language courses. Learners work in virtual classrooms where they interact with their teacher and peers. The methodology is task-based learning and includes collaborative work, a compulsory element of the course's continuous evaluation.

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The literature on collaborative work provides a theoretical justification to its inclusion in course design: it promotes meaningful learning (Karppinen, 2005), can foster motivation (Rogat, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & DiDonato, 2013), and increases language learning gains (Hsu & Lo, 2018). These benefits can promote increasing learner engagement, a construct comprising three dimensions: social, affective, and cognitive (Svalberg, 2009). The social dimension refers to learners' participation and involvement in pedagogical tasks, the affective aspect represents their emotional connection to their learning and peers, and the cognitive element revolves around what is learned and how.

Ensuring learners become and stay engaged is a priority for language courses, and particularly important in entirely online courses which can have high dropout rates and in which learners have reported feeling isolated (Yuan & Kim, 2014). While collaborative work can help learner engagement, anecdotal experience at the CIM has shown it can have the opposite effect due to issues such as conflict within groups, scheduling and time management difficulties, and unequal participation amongst group members, also reported in studies with a similar scope (Sun, 2014).

In order to enable learners to fully benefit from peer collaboration, we designed a GDTA to train them to overcome issues related to negative dynamics within learner groups working collaboratively.

This case study seeks to understand the impact of a GDTA on learner engagement in terms of learners' sense of connectedness to their peers, motivation, and perceived learning gains. Below, we describe the methodology and report on the results according to the three dimensions of learner engagement – social, affective, and cognitive.

2. Method

The case study's context is a fully online upper-intermediate (B2 CEFR) French as a foreign language course offered biannually at the CIM. Learners take the course as part of their undergraduate degree and are aged 24 to 56.

Data was collected from anonymous and voluntary questionnaires sent to two cohorts from two consecutive semesters (Table 1). In total, 69 learners responded to the survey. Gender information was not collected. Both cohorts participated in the same course activities, with the difference that the GDTA was implemented only for the second one.

Table 1. GDTA, number of classrooms, and learners

	GDTA	#Classrooms	#Learners enrolled	#Survey responses
1. Cohort 1	No	5	149	39
2. Cohort 2	Yes	4	122	30

The collaborative activities consisted of pair and small group (three to four learners) activities, using Google Docs for asynchronous collaborative writing in groups, and a videoconferencing tool for synchronous pair speaking. For Cohort 1, small groups and pairs for these tasks were formed *ad hoc* before the start of the activities, and might stay the same if the learners wanted, but they might also change for each task.

For Cohort 2, the GDTA was implemented before beginning collaborative work. This activity consisted in taking part in a group Skype call to get to know each other better, and plan for upcoming collaborative tasks. The planning included assigning roles to different group members, discussing the steps involved in the writing task, as well as forming pairs for the speaking tasks and agreeing on meeting times. Instructions were provided to guide the Skype meeting conversation, which was recorded and sent to their teacher.

Two online surveys were administered to both cohorts: the first survey before the start of collaborative tasks and the second survey at the end of the course. Both surveys included three seven-point Likert-scale items asking learners about their engagement with the course, each corresponding to a dimension of learner engagement: “I feel connected to my classmates” (social), “I am highly motivated in this course” (affective), and “I am improving my French” (cognitive). Additionally, the end of semester survey included two open questions: “Which aspect of pair and group work motivated you the most” (affective), and “which activity (collaborative writing or pair speaking) helped you learn the most” (cognitive)? Quantitative analysis of the Likert-scale questions and qualitative analysis of open fields in the questionnaire were conducted using a content analysis methodology.

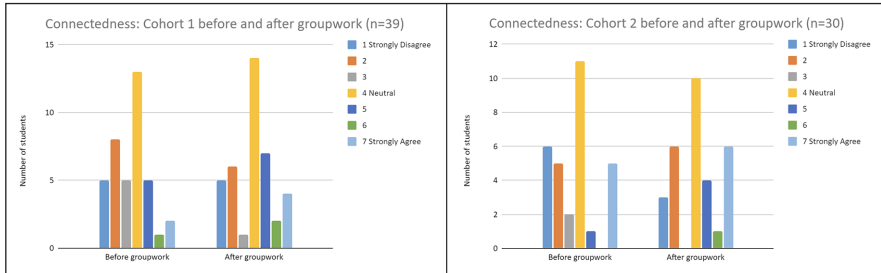
3. Results and discussion

3.1. Quantitative analysis of Likert-scale answers

- “I feel connected to my classmates”

Cohort 1 and 2 learners' responses indicated a rise in their connection with their peers after collaborative work (groupwork). For Cohort 2, this increase was slightly higher, something which could be attributed to their participation in the GDTA (Figure 1).

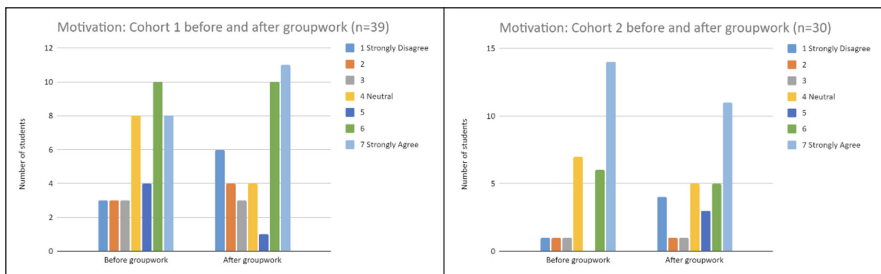
Figure 1. Perceived connectedness to classmates before and after groupwork for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2



- “I am highly motivated in this course”

Compared to Cohort 1, answers from Cohort 2 indicated a decrease in learners' reported level of motivation, which can perhaps be explained in more depth when looking at the answers to the open question on motivation (Figure 2).

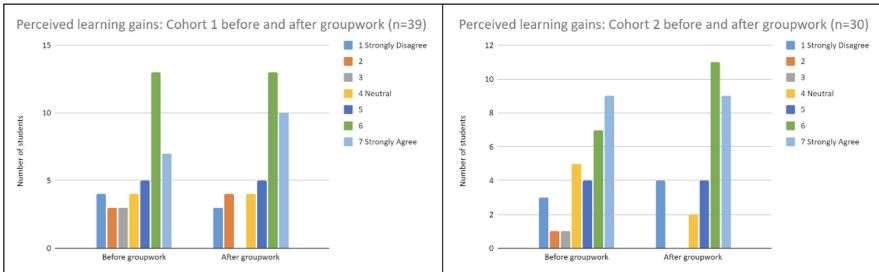
Figure 2. Perceived motivation before and after groupwork for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2



- “I am improving my French”

The highest increase for both cohorts was in learners' perceived learning gains before and after collaborative work. However, after the GDTA this was slightly higher for Cohort 2 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Perceived learning gains before and after groupwork for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2



3.2. Qualitative analysis of open questions

Here, learners shared many thoughts often unrelated to the actual question, which nonetheless helped yield insights into their ideas and experiences about the course. These answers were then coded according to positive and negative comments.

Issues related to time management, scheduling, and unequal participation were reported by Cohort 1. Negative comments from both cohorts mentioned perceived level differences amongst group members/pairs preventing participants from performing to the best of their abilities, and the importance of assessment, given the context. While nine Cohort 1 learners expressed negative emotions, ranging from ‘stress’ to ‘panic’, only one Cohort 2 student commented on the ‘coldness’ of peer interactions. In Cohort 1, two learners described working collaboratively as motivational, an idea which was reinforced by Cohort 2, where nine learners commented on this.

In Cohort 2, four learners mentioned the continuous collaboration and interaction with group members as positive, reinforcing the idea that the GDTA and the ability to work within the same group of learners increased their feelings of connectedness to their peers.

Very few positive emotions were reported by Cohort 1 learners: four learners highlighted that working in groups allowed them to get to know others. However, they did not connect positive emotions with motivational or learning gains, in contrast with learners in Cohort 2, where words like ‘motivation’ or ‘motivated’ (5), and ‘enriching’ (1) were connected with positive emotions, such as ‘happy’ (4), ‘enjoy’ (2), and words related to peer connection, such as ‘breaking the ice’, and ‘making friends’ (3). Despite a decrease in reported motivation on the Likert-scale,

open answers from Cohort 2 indicated learners connected motivation to perceived learning gains arising from such connections. Furthermore, while four learners in Cohort 1 indicated a preference for working alone, only one learner from Cohort 2 did.

4. Conclusions

The Likert-scale responses suggest bigger differences in the dimension of cognitive engagement. However, the qualitative analysis reveals positive emotions and an increased sense of connectedness that learners identified as instrumental to their learning after GDTA. These results, although tentative given the limited number of participants and scope of analysis, highlight the importance of including GDTA before the start of collaborative work to help learners achieve a more positive learning experience. Although the differences are not substantial enough to draw firm conclusions, the positive results warrant further exploration, which should include classroom participation logs analysis and a comparison of perceived learning gains, and learner assessment results.

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