

# The role of group activity in the teaching/learning process of FLE

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Language teaching has evolved throughout its history, leading teachers to rethink their teaching methods and find ways to meet new demands and deliver the desired results. Therefore, all foreign language teachers and learners have a desire to practice effective and sustainable teaching.

The concept of teaching/learning has also changed in meaning in today's didactics, which no longer gives all responsibility to the teacher but also to the learner. The latter now plays the central role in their learning, being considered as their own duty to fulfill. What more can group activity bring to the process of teaching FLE? Through group activity, not only does teaching require more attention from learners, but it also focuses on the social cooperation of learners in order to prepare them for non-predetermined tasks.

Then, interactive teaching based on group activity will reduce the fear of making mistakes because the teacher, by granting learners the right to make mistakes in their hypotheses, allows them to say everything they have observed and understood without being true certainly at first. Another thing to consider is the creativity that this teaching will be able to create in learners, each acting according to their own tastes. There are still other interests including more lasting learning, increased motivation and autonomy in learning. Regarding FLE (French as a Foreign Language), Iranian learners do not have enough real situations, if not very few, in which they can use the language to generate links with other subjects speaking French as their mother tongue or second language.

In this research, we will endeavor to show how the implementation of group activities in French language learning courses would lead to the autonomy of FLE learners. We will also see how this activity could correct learning conditions in order to improve collective interactions. To achieve these objectives, this research work will take the following approach.

First, we will study the definition of group activity. Then, we will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of group work, the difficulties of the task, and autonomy. Then, we will present the characteristics of the action-oriented approach. Finally, based on group activity among Iranian FLE learners and the degree of their success, we will present the results of interactive teaching. This is obtained on the basis of a data analysis that will lead us to the presentation of the grids for the multiple-choice questions of the questionnaire.

Group work is an interactive activity intended for groups of 3 to 5 learners with varying levels of performance. This type of work is characterized by its social aspect and aims primarily to improve pragmatic performance in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) courses.

The primary goal of group work is to achieve social learning. This can also lead, secondarily, to improved performance in French as a foreign language. This improvement will likely be less noticeable among "strong" learners, but more learners achieve the learning objectives of French as a foreign language based on interactive group work. Randomized group formation and learners working together within these groups are the best possible way to improve social interaction.

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The conditions for interactive group work are as follows:

1. Interactive educational behavior;
  - a. Content that enables collaborative work, learner-centered communication, autonomy and interaction within the group;
  - b. Social learning through "tandem" work
2. Achieve self-learning, self-correction and self-assessment

Before starting to work in a group, one should practice working together in the form of "tandem responsibility," where two learners are closely involved in the work. If this last "formula" is such an important condition for interactive group work, it is because, thanks to it, learners learn, in parallel, in addition to their linguistic mission, to fulfill a social mission. This obliges the teacher to make them aware of this phenomenon and to provide them with the opportunity to practice this social mission.

Through interactive group work, the positive social relationships that have been created by the leadership teams can then be extended to the entire learning group.

Group work is likely to foster socio-cognitive conflict based on the confrontation of points of view, causing the imbalance from which a new structuring of knowledge and representations can arise. In this way, group activity could lead to each learner becoming aware of the processes of appropriation of learning. Through cooperative work and the social interaction it underpins, the skills that firmly place the individual within a collective are developed.

It is certain that the activities to be conducted, the classroom atmosphere, the classroom experience, and the time of year are all factors that determine the organization of the class into groups. But inevitably, the teacher is led to ask himself various questions:

- How many groups will I form?
- How many learners will I associate per group?
- Which learners can be brought together?
- How to distribute activities?
- What educational structure will I put in place?
- What benefits can I expect from it?
- What pitfalls should you avoid?
- What geographical, material and temporal structure should be adopted?
- How can we prevent group work from becoming an opportunity for some learners to be distracted or even do nothing?

The distribution of learners into classes, even if it is generally done by age groups, inevitably leads to heterogeneous groupings of learners. The causes of this heterogeneity are diverse: different sociocultural, socio-economic and sometimes ethnic origins; differences in development (physical or psychological) and rhythms; differences in the learning processes implemented; different school curricula; gaps in knowledge levels; different life histories, etc.

After studying and researching the Humanities, one realizes the importance of action and group work for learning. According to socioconstructivist approaches, to promote communication learning, the group is an essential means. In language acquisition as well as in learning and improving communication, the group can be considered a means of enrichment: attractive forces increase and repulsive forces that threaten interactive participation weaken.

Indeed, the simple fact of being among others, similar but different, of acting with them, of "cooperating" or of being in competition, induces particular behaviors. The group will allow each person to find their way, to situate themselves, to become aware of their similarities and differences, to learn what their rights and duties are. It will prepare the learner for their present and future life in society, within the framework of education in citizenship. Group work therefore has many advantages in the current educational context, however, as P. MEIRIEU points out, for such practices to be truly beneficial, learners must be sufficiently prepared for them while being informed of their purpose.

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### **Advantages of group work:**

- The learner must feel part of a community. When they are invited to work together with one or more partners, they may feel that they are not isolated in any particular way.
- Working together can have a decisive influence on learner motivation when they take on a role in the group. Thus, they realize that it can promote the success of group work.
- Some students are always silent in class not because of their weakness, but because they are very cautious and only raise their hands after careful consideration. Thus, they become active in small groups and contribute significantly to the group work.
- If the results that learners achieve in group work are correct, this creates a better emotional climate and strengthens bonds within the group.
- Students learn independent work, self-critical attitude, acceptance and use of criticism from others by cooperating with their partners.
- When learners do the correction themselves, that is, they correct their classmates during group work, instead of the teacher, this prevents the negative effects that teacher-made correction could have on some learners in terms of "motivation to produce." Classmate-made correction is less disruptive to the learner than teacher-made correction from an emotional point of view.
- Interviewing with one or more partners will be a necessary form of exercise to develop communication skills. Group work allows for intensifying training opportunities with an appropriate purpose.
- Ideas that learners come up with in a small group are more likely to be implemented than in a full class, stimulating language creativity. In fact, learners discover new variations of exercises or new situations on their own.
- In group activity-based teaching, the teacher is needed as an "assistant." But in frontal teaching, the teacher is the one from whom all the learning stimuli come, which, in many cases, lead the learner to make mistakes.
- Strong learners, who are often underemployed due to their superiority, become aware of their social role as assistants through integration into small groups. Thus, group work allows them to implement their performance superiority in such a way that their classmates see it as an advantage for themselves.

A significant disadvantage of group work—and unfortunately a determining factor in whether or not group work is practiced—is that good group work generally requires more intensive preparation than face-to-face teaching. Group work often requires providing learners with specific materials. But the greatest difficulty seems to lie in this: planning and organizing group work in such a way as to enable learners, within the given time:

- 1) independent development of the task;
- 2) reporting the results of the group work to the "plenary assembly".

A teacher without adequate training initially finds it very difficult to achieve this goal. Moreover, both teachers and learners need to practice group work.

When a class is accustomed to it, the evidence of self-organization and autonomous learning within the group strikes with astonishment the observer who has no experience of this pedagogical practice.

It may happen in a group that one or two learners, through their leadership role, do all the work of the group and the other learners languish in their passivity.

Many errors in group work in FLE remain uncorrected. This objection is common. It is certainly valid in the field of phonetics.

The most common objection to group work in FLE is that learners express themselves in the group in LM

Since the action-oriented approach considers both the language user and learner as social actors who have to accomplish tasks, it therefore promotes group work. Thus, this approach better meets the needs of Iranian learners who want to learn French through group work. Indeed, in the action-oriented approach, language is considered an instrument of action and social interaction.

Because our group-based approach places all responsibility not only on the teacher, but also on the learner, this approach prepares learners to perform tasks with each student playing an active role. Indeed, all learners work simultaneously, and much of the interaction is simulated.

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First, we need to define the task so that we can then declare its relationship to group work.

A task is a form of mutual cooperation or intergroup interaction between learners. Therefore, it is a form of social activity that is free and interactive. Learners are the main actors, each of whom must play an active role in order to complete the task. Consequently, the task is almost impossible to accomplish without group work. However, learners face difficulties in completing it.

Depending on the individual, their skills (general or communicative) and personal characteristics, as well as the conditions and constraints in which the task is performed, the approach to the same activity or task can be significantly different. Therefore, the difficulty of a given task for an individual and the strategies for carrying it out are the result of the combination of these factors.

From this, it is difficult to predict with certainty the difficulty or simplicity of a task. We can therefore consider the difficulty of the task according to the skills and characteristics of the user/learner, including the learner's own intentions and learning style – the conditions and constraints that determine the learner's/user's performance and which, in a learning situation, can be adjusted to suit their own skills and characteristics.

Autonomy is "the ability to take responsibility for one's own affairs." In the context of language learning, autonomy is therefore the ability to take responsibility for one's own learning. This ability is not innate; it must be acquired, either "naturally" or (most frequently) through formal, that is, systematic and reflective learning.

Since in the teaching/learning process of FLE based on group work, this ability to take charge of one's own learning is given to the learner, it is therefore considered that the latter has become autonomous in his learning. By providing learners with appropriate means and materials, such as dictionaries and grammars, it is perfectly possible for the group to reach this judgment on its own.

Learners thus learn to use these teaching methods independently. Therefore, in group work, learners can learn to work independently under the supervision of those who cooperate with them, to have a self-critical attitude, and to accept and use criticism from others.

Since the interactive group activity, which is also called cooperative learning, and the degree of its effectiveness are the objective of this article, we would like to verify its degree of effectiveness among Iranian learners, who have a school habit of individual learning. Here, it will be a question of presenting the group activity in an experimental way. First, we participated as observers in a class where the teacher taught some sessions based on the group activity and some other sessions without group activity.

Then, he was given a questionnaire and based on this questionnaire, we presented our observations and remarks. In a second step, we taught two skills – reading comprehension and written production – to the three groups of learners from the Kanoun and Mojtaba Fani institutes in Tehran, once with group activity and another time without group activity. Then, we compared the results obtained from a questionnaire addressed to these learners. In the third step, we prepared a questionnaire containing open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions, filled out by Iranian FLE teachers and then moved on to present their ideas based on their own experience. Then, we will look at the statistical results of the multiple-choice questions to better define the situation of FLE teaching in language institutes in Iran, according to the reaction of learners to the various attitudes of their teachers.

We taught two skills—reading comprehension and writing—to three groups of A2-level learners at the Kanoun and Mojtaba Fani Institutes in Tehran, once with group activity and once without group activity. Then, we compared the results obtained from a questionnaire addressed to these learners. To teach reading comprehension, we chose a text. During the session where we used the group activity, we divided the class into several groups of four learners. Then, we gave each group a paragraph and asked them to read their own paragraph together. Then, each group explained their part to other groups, and so on. They answered the comprehension questions in groups and expressed their opinions about the topic of the text. And finally, we asked them to write a text on the topic together.

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However, during the session where we taught without using group activity, the approach is different and quite simple. The learners did all these steps individually. In the questionnaire addressed to the learners, we considered some abilities such as;

- 1. Autonomy
  - 2. participation
  - 3. self-confidence
  - 4. motivation
- 5. performance

To determine which approach is more effective and practical, we selected a few questions for each. Finally, we aggregated the results by percentage. We found that in all cases, the percentage of group activity was higher than that of individual activity.

To better understand how to act to achieve everything discussed so far, without insisting this time on the textbook used, we prepared a questionnaire consisting of MCQs at the beginning and open-answer questions thereafter so that teachers could talk about their own experiences in teaching FLE to Iranian learners. The people concerned are some of the teachers of the Institute of Languages of Iran - "KANOUN" -. By asking questions requiring an open answer, we made sure to know the approach used by teachers and how they achieve the results sought by the group activity which are first of all: good learning and good acquisition, then motivation and autonomy which will lead to mastery of the language. The latter consists not only of having formal linguistic means, but also of knowing how to implement them adequately in a given situation. We will immediately move on to the analysis and development of the answers and comments that we have sometimes given and this is to add an opinion for or against. But overall, the answers show that teachers are, in most cases, in favor of interactive teaching, the degree of effectiveness of which we would like to verify among Iranian FLE learners. However, being afraid of being rejected by the learners, they prefer either to forget this approach or to use it with caution while considering other elements such as the level of the courses or the language element to be taught.

Among these 12 questions, we will only analyze a few of the most important ones and those that best answer our questions posed at the beginning of this article.

Ž Question No. 4

4- What is the result in the interactive learning of learners who learn FLE from the group activity?

- 1. They learn better.
- 2. They have difficulty keeping up with this learning and this takes away their motivation.
- 3. Interactive teaching based on group activity increases their motivation and therefore participation in activities.
- 4. This takes away their desire to be active in the course for fear of making mistakes.

47% of teachers chose the 3rd choice proposed, which speaks of the interest of the interactive approach, that is, the increase of motivation in participation in activities. Here, it should be said that this motivation, which the teacher tries to create in learners, will not be easy to acquire since the rejection felt by learners towards the interactive approach, not going with their habits, could make it very difficult to access motivation. Then, the 2nd choice, constituting 20% of the choices, occupies the second place and declares that this approach, presenting difficulties in its realization, removes motivation. But it should be said that when they follow well, they understand better. 13% of teachers think that this approach will lead to better learning. And finally, there is a share of 20% for the last choice which speaks of the fear of making mistakes among learners in carrying out activities; which is very common among Iranian learners and which prevents them in most cases from being active during the course. To remove or eliminate this fear, the teacher should choose strategies that do not directly reject the responses given by the learners.

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10- How do you help your learners to be autonomous in their learning, as they progress through this process? (Explain in 2 to 3 lines)

Here are some tips, according to some FLE teachers, which help learners achieve autonomy in their learning:

- Allow learners to be creative in teaching:
- Ask them to create dialogues, to write texts where most of the skills are involved, because they use the vocabulary and grammar that they know and then by reading, it is reading and good pronunciation that improve, and finally, it is also listening comprehension that will be called upon.
- Suggest they do some research
- Ask them to watch cartoons or listen to songs (this way, when they encounter new things, they will look them up in a dictionary or on the Internet)
- Ensuring that their metacognition is activated, that is, by encouraging them to reflect on their own production
- Ask them to give presentations
- Give them activities to do in groups
- Suggest they write a lot
- Present them with additional books or websites for personal work and then they have to figure it out on their own.

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11- For which level do you prefer the interactive approach based on group activity? (Justify your answer in 2 lines)

Among the FLE teachers, there are some who define a specific level to which interactive teaching based on group activity could better respond and this is due to the lack of knowledge of the language learners which prevents them from explaining the phenomena of the language. So, here we are talking about beginners. There are others who prefer this approach at the intermediate and advanced levels because they think that at these two levels, there is more autonomy in learning and that this approach requires this autonomy from the learners. From another point of view, it is thought that there would be less risk of misunderstanding and that at the advanced level the learners are more motivated and do not despair if the approach is incompatible with their school habits. And finally, there are some who do not consider the level among the necessary factors for interactive teaching. To conclude, we can say that the interactive approach is used at different levels, beginner or intermediate or advanced, by teachers while many do not take into account the level in the choice of the interactive approach.

#### **Observations and remarks:**

- At the beginning of this session, most of the learners in the class did not want to share the tasks and tended to want to do everything and answer, all alone, certainly due to a lack of habit (training). They did not easily accept that others contradicted them and did not agree with their hypotheses, their representations, their ideas. They tended to keep the "power" to write,
- The presence of an adult is highly required in this activity in order to help learners manage their relationships, their confrontations, their cooperation.
- Furthermore, through this approach, almost all learners were involved in one way or another within the framework of the didactic contract that had been specified at the beginning of the session. At the end of the activity, some told us that they had appreciated working in this way even if it had required some effort. This allows us to share P. MEIRIEU's opinion when he emphasizes the need to perceive the group work technique as a process of appropriation of knowledge.

- learners performed better at the end of the session than at the beginning (awareness, progressive interest, motivation and gratification among peers, etc.). However, it is difficult to measure the progress made, the knowledge acquired or modified at the end of the session. It is thought that these skills take time to be acquired. Indeed, it is only over the long term (one year, one cycle) that we can see the effects on individuals and on the group. This leads us to ask another question: Wouldn't it be wise to accustom learners to working in groups as early as possible in their schooling?
- Some learners who do not usually participate in group work were very active during this type of activity. The question that arises here is "Why this lack of participation in groups?" Inhibition, fear of ridicule, lack of security, self-confidence, relationship with adults...? Thus, another question arises: "How can these phenomena be avoided in group activities?"
- We must admit that we encountered some difficulties during this session. For example, we had a little trouble, at the start of the session, motivating all the learners, capturing their attention, and provoking horizontal communication. We wondered if this was due to the lack of clarity in our instructions, or the lack of meaning of the activity in the eyes of the learners, or their lack of autonomy in working in groups, or... Furthermore, we were not able to respect the time we had planned for this session and we wondered if the cause was the fact of working in groups and/or our lack of experience.
- To conclude on this very rich experience, we would say that such a pedagogical practice requires know-how but also interpersonal skills on the part of the teacher who must play many roles simultaneously: teacher, educator, coach, accompanist, guide, referent, regulator ... we would add that, having observed it in this session but also in other circumstances, we think more and more that group work, when it is not an end in itself and is articulated with individual and collective practices, is a response to the differentiation of learning and a concrete implementation of socioconstructivist theories. It is a pedagogical practice which, although punctual, cannot and must not be improvised.

**The advantages of this interactive teaching based on group work in these courses are as follows:**

- First of all, they learned how to organize joint work, to plan its stages, to find a place for each person that would allow them to integrate into the group and, more particularly, to free themselves from a negative image that others had of them.
- Second, learners felt responsible for their learning because it was not the teacher who was in charge of "teaching," but rather they were placed in the position of "monitor." In the strict sense of the term, there was no teamwork, as social interactions were dual relationships—as in the traditional classroom—between the instructor and each of the learners.
- In other words, because less information was being conveyed to learners, there was an opportunity to emphasize key ideas more, give more examples, and make connections with learners' prior knowledge.
- The use of interactive activities maximized learner participation, enhanced motivation and generated interest in the subject matter, developed critical thinking, integrated real-world and immediate situations with the content, and encouraged learners to delve deeper into the knowledge being taught.
- when learners had the same objective, participated equally and actively in the execution of the task, shared their knowledge, expertise and resources while respecting and helping each other. Thus, when the task proposed to them is structured in such a way that no member of the team can carry it out individually. In fact, it was noticed that positive interdependence had been created within the teams.
- To conclude, we would like to say that thanks to this internship, we truly and happily felt like we were in the "shoes" of a teacher. This facilitated the smooth running of the sessions we conducted, encouraged the increasingly warm and interested welcome of the learners, whom we must also thank, and confirmed once again our desire to become a teacher.

In this article, we have emphasized that in the teaching/learning process, which has evolved and been considered from a different point of view than in the past in didactics, it is no longer the teacher who plays the central role but it is the learner himself who is primarily responsible for the constitution of his knowledge. So, learning is no longer done by a simple transmission of knowledge by the teacher and the role of the learner is no longer to play the role of a receiver.

Furthermore, we noted that the new conceptions of learner/learning and teacher/learner relationships presented by this system require specific training on this subject. The role of the learner changes, becoming a social actor. The role of the teacher is also affected, becoming a facilitator. Then, we illustrated ways, among many others, of introducing the principles of this teaching in the classroom. We proposed interactive learning using a new methodology that is essential for the learner: the action-based approach.

Regarding the first question of this research, we see that research comparing the use of active learning techniques with more traditional methods shows that active learning can improve test and exam results. Students are more engaged than those who only take notes, participate three times more, and feel the need to delve deeper into the content to participate effectively in activities. In addition, this learning supports and facilitates knowledge transfer. Indeed, the social interactions that this learning allows encourage learners to verbalize their ideas, compare them, discuss, and compare their ways of learning. Creating a context favorable to the discussion of knowledge, within a cooperative group, improves the quality of learning by supporting knowledge transfer.

In this teaching, the emphasis is on the role of the learner. What remains to be considered is the textbook used. Thus, it is preferable to have a textbook that has chosen a learner-centered approach for its approach.

As for the second research question related to motivation, it is found that it is in the accomplishment of tasks that we could find an active role in all learners who act in interaction. Therefore, group activity helps learners achieve autonomy in their learning. By choosing an approach that includes tasks to accomplish, the learner can better control his learning.

We would like to say that the teacher can adopt active learning formulas in small groups in any course, with advanced or beginner students, and at different times in the teaching process. And finally, we have endeavored to demonstrate the place of group activity in the teaching/learning process of FLE. This study led us to the following findings:

First of all, regarding participation, they learned to organize joint work, to plan its stages, to find a place for each person that would allow them to integrate into the group and, more particularly, to free themselves from a negative image that others had of them.

Secondly, regarding responsibility, the learners felt responsible for their learning because it was not the master who was responsible for "teaching", but rather they themselves who were placed in the position of "monitor". Thirdly, it was a question of arousing contradiction and inter-argumentation in order to allow each person to test their ideas and to argue them. Each person was required to justify their point of view and was subject to criticism from others.

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