Françoise Gaitley

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Professional
Project
Group Work

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GROUP WORK IN THE MODERN LANGUAGE CLASS

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INTRODUCTION

Before 1980, group work was a rare feature in the classroom. More recently, it has become recognised as a valuable method of teaching and is now widely used.

In Modern Language teaching, group work is so well accepted that most recent methodology or course books provide plenty of ideas of tasks for group work without questioning its pedagogical value any more. It constitutes an essential part of classroom management and requires the teacher to acquire special skills.

My interest for group work developed a long time ago when I was myself a pupil. I remember finding the experience stressful and frustrating and reflecting upon its value. As a teacher, it puzzled me at first! I started to teach adult French classes 4 years ago and was advised by my Head of Department (at the Institute for Applied Language Studies, Edinburgh) to use this method. I found group work difficult to set up and monitor, and was conscious of my incompetence. On the contrary, I worked with small groups of pupils for 2 years when I was a foreign language assistant and enjoyed it thoroughly. I also think the pupils learned a lot from our sessions together and found them stimulating. This school year, I have observed a lot of group work in modern language classes of various Lothian secondary schools and I have also used it a lot in my teaching, more successfully than in the past!

In this project, I have gathered what I have learnt from my readings on the topic and from the investigation and research work I have mostly carried out in two Lothian schools: Lasswade High School and Craigmout High School. I can now understand the mistakes I made in the past better and see how essential the role of the teacher is to ensure productive and enjoyable group work in the classroom.
This project comprises 2 main parts. Part One is a review of the relevant literature on the topic chosen. In this section, I define group work and look at its various characteristics as objectively as possible. Part Two concentrates on my own investigation on the topic. In this part, I first describe my approach and method of research, I then present my results, obtained from classroom observations and questionnaires given out to teachers and pupils in the two schools mentioned above, and finally comment on my findings.

Note: In this project, I have tended to use the terms 'learner' and 'pupil' when referring to secondary school pupils in particular. However, in the review of literature of this project, the term 'student' often occurs in a more global sense, often referring to the adult learner as well as the school age pupil, and is likely to be used by modern language secondary school teachers as well as teachers of English as a foreign language.
PART ONE: DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUP WORK

A normal class at secondary school comprises approximately 30 pupils. The traditional approach to teaching such a large number of pupils by one teacher is a teacher-centred approach, when interactions take place between the teacher and one pupil at a time. Group work teaching makes it possible to modify this pattern by multiplying the interactions taking place in the classroom at the same time: The teacher organises the pupils to work in pairs or in small groups (usually 3 to about 6 pupils).

Pairs and groups can be arranged in a variety of ways, such as:

- Pairing and grouping pupils regardless of their ability (friends and neighbours may work together).
- Pairing or grouping a good pupil with a less able one.
- Pairing or groupings pupils of similar levels.
- Students work in pairs for a short time and then change partners.
- Students work individually for a few minutes and then compare their answers with a partner/partners...

In their book, Co-operative Group Work - An Overview, H. Cowie and J. Rudduck advise:

*Group size may vary but it should not be so large or so small that it undermines the fundamental principle that group members may learn through easy interchange with each other... The physical placing of participants should be such as to allow easy interaction: a circle, square, rectangle or arc of chairs... (p 18)*

A change in teaching styles has many implications on education and much has been written on the value of group work as it constitutes such a revolutionary approach to teaching. Indeed, let us have a look at the various characteristics of group work: (A) Intensity of involvement, (B) More natural interactions, (C) Individualisation, (D) Co-operation, (E) A change in the classroom routine, (F) A change in the role of the teacher, (G) A different approach to correcting mistakes, (H) Different types of activities in the classroom, (I) A new perspective on the grading and the testing of activities.
(A) Intensity of Involvement:

"Small groups provide greater intensity of involvement, so that the quality of language practice is increased, and the opportunities for feedback and monitoring also, given adequate guidance and preparation by the teacher."

(p 77, Brumfit, C., Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching. The Roles of Fluency and Accuracy)

In the traditional language class, interactions take place between the teacher and individual students. This is called "lockstep" teaching.

![Lockstep pattern](image)

"Research reports from all over the world indicate that in the typical classroom Flanders' "rule of thirds" reigns, i.e. for two thirds of the time in classrooms there is talk and for two thirds of this time, there is teacher talk (Flanders 1970)"

(p 101, Heasley, B., "Interacting in the classroom: Talking and Learning", Teaching the Teacher).

According to the above statement, out of an hour class, only 13 minutes is allocated to pupil talk. If we then divide this number by the number of pupils, supposing that there are 30 pupils in the class, this means that each pupil can only expect to speak 20 seconds on average.

Pair work changes this ratio considerably. Simultaneous interactions take place: a classroom of approximately 30 learners is divided into pairs or small groups of pupils who communicate with each other. Meanwhile, the teacher circulates to listen to individual learners and help them where and when needed.
Pair work interactions

Group work interactions

Many teachers have written about the topic of students' involvement:

Catherine Walker writes:

*There is the simple mathematical fact that each student gets more talking time - while the teacher hears and is able to correct, if s/he wishes as many students as in a traditional class*.


Mary Wood adds:

*"The amount of practice each student gets is greatly increased by the use of pair work, and if for no other reason than this, language teachers should use pair work as a regular part of their class".*

(p 76, "Effective Class Management", *Teaching and the Teacher*)

Ingrid Freebairn writes about the importance of active involvement of the learner:

*"Nobody ever learnt anything by being passive. Even when reading or listening to a text, the students should have a purpose in reading or listening or a task to solve. In other words, all stages of the learning process should require the students to take an active part, either verbally or mentally".*

(p 20, "The Use of Communicative Material", *Teaching and the Teacher*)
Indeed, group work does not only provide a quantity of interactions, it also provides a quality of exchange: pair/group wo rk allows the students to "do" with language. This characteristic is the essence of pair/group work. This takes us to Jane Myles who quotes this Chinese proverb:

"I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand".

(p 63, "Using Magazines", Techniques of Teaching)

This notion of 'doing' is at the center of The Threshold Level, by J. A. Van Ek, which is one of the foundations of today's communicative approach to foreign language learning.

"The basic characteristic of the model used in our definition" (definition of the learner's linguistic needs) "is that it tries to specify foreign language ability as skill rather than knowledge. It analyses what the learner will have to be able to do in the foreign language and determines only in the second place what language-forms (words, structures, etc.) the learners will have to be able to handle in order to do all that has been specified".

(Paragraph 1.1.1. p 5, Van Ek, J. A., The Threshold Level for Modern Language Learning in Schools)

(B) More natural interactions:

The setting is more natural than that of the full class, for the size of the group resembles that of normal conversational groupings. Because of this, the stress which accompanies 'public' performance in the classroom should be reduced".

(Brumfit, C., p 77, Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching, The Roles of Fluency and Accuracy)

Indeed, group work interactions are unpredictable and spontaneous which provides a natural and authentic learning environment. The tasks are learner-centred so that the pupils have to take the responsibility for their own learning as they decide themselves when, where and how they wish to get involved. The working atmosphere should therefore be more relaxed and less stressful than in a traditional class where the teacher asks individual questions to the pupils and where they have to 'perform'.

Ingrid Freebairn uses a very powerful image:

"I am sure that nowadays more people would agree that the best learning takes place in a low-risk setting. High-risk teaching creates tension and a fear of making mistakes and looking foolish in front of one's peers.

The best way of lowering the risk for the learner is to remove the 'Big Brother' approach to language practice. Practice conducted in pairs or groups is far more likely to foster a feeling of security in the learner than a teacher-directed 'full-frontal' attack. Material which allows the learners to initiate and carry out their own practice is ideal."

(p 19, "The Use of Communicative material", Teaching and the Teacher)

Catherine Walker adds:

"There is a feeling in the profession, and some experimental evidence, that a classroom where the teacher is not always the visual and aural focus is more conducive to effective learning."


However, the authenticity of group work in the modern language class is a controversial issue. One could argue that, when pupils have the same native language and speak a foreign language between themselves in the classroom, which is the normal set-up of a modern language class at secondary school, natural communication is not really encouraged since they would express themselves much better in their own language. The setting is not natural nor authentic because the ratio "native speakers:learner" which would be very high in real life - for example if the learner stayed in the foreign country - is totally reversed in the language class with one fluent speaker of the language (the teacher) and 30 learners of the foreign language.
Len Peterson, who is a teacher of English as a foreign language, writes:

"As far as students (Italian students) are concerned, talking English in a class is a wholly artificial activity. "Why's the teacher asking me a question in English and expecting me to answer in English?" Even worse, "Why's he/she getting me to speak in English to my neighbour when we all speak perfectly good Italian? It's all just a silly pretence, and I don't see why I've got to join in".

(p 46, "How do I keep them interested?, Teaching and the Teacher)

(c) Individualisation:

"Experience also suggests that placing students in small groups assists individualisation, for each group, being limited by its own capacities, determines its own appropriate level of working more precisely than can a class working in lock-step, with its larger numbers".

(Brumfit, C., Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching. The Roles of Fluency and Accuracy)

In a small group, each individual is more important proportionally than in a large class. Therefore a small group should theoretically adapt better to the needs of each individual. Indeed, because of the nature of the small group, each individual gets feed back from the other members of the groups when s/he suggests an idea or makes a comment, and this personal touch facilitates learning.

(D) Co-operation:

Let us look at these two statements, which throw a light of two different aspects of co-operation.

"Research has established that under certain circumstances the use of co-operative learning methods increases student achievement more than traditional instructional practices. In addition, these methods consistently improve student self-esteem and social relations among students, in particular, race relations and acceptance of main-streamed students".

"Every interactional situation has the potential for co-operation or conflict. How the situation actually develops depends on the attitudes and intentions of the people involved, and on their interpretations of each other's attitudes and intentions".

From my observations, it seems that students generally like co-operating with each other: they listen and speak to each other, teach each other new vocabulary and structures, correct each other, use lot of facial expressions, gestures and mime to communicate more effectively, refer to their book, dictionary or notes if appropriate to check the accuracy of a language form, might write or draw to explain something...

However, co-operation is not always successful and easy. If for example, two pupils of different levels work together, the experience might be stressful and frustrating because of the following factors:

- Frustration of the better pupil.
- The less able pupil may feel ashamed of making mistakes and of wasting the time of the better pupil, which may lead to a loss of self-esteem, bad feelings and stress.
- The better pupil might feel uneasy about being so much better and find it difficult to be understood by his partner consequently lowering his/her level to bridge the gap.
- The better pupil has less of an incentive, less of an opportunity to learn, be stretched or corrected than the weaker one.

Also, one does not always relate very well to one's partner and communication can therefore be difficult not because of linguistic reasons but rather because of a clash of personality, a big difference in age, maturity, social class, education and/or ideology.

Guy Aston suggests that the best suited activities in order to avoid conflictual relationships between learners as much as possible are role-plays:

"...It does not seem to me we have the right to manipulate the personal relationships of our learners. Can we ask Learners A and B to make friends when in fact they may loathe each other's guts? Because we are
teachers - not psychotherapists - I feel we should limit ourselves to the manipulation of imaginary relationships in which students can experiment interactional speech without being involved in 'prima persona'.

(p 25, "Roleplay and interactional speech", Techniques of Teaching. from Theory to Practice)

Also H. Cowie and J. Rudduck mention a very interesting point that I was not aware of:

"As Connell and others (1982) have pointed out, there is a contradiction between the working class family's "practices of co-operative coping and the school curriculum demand for individual achievement"." (p 122)

(p 11, Co-operative Group Work - An Overview)

(E) A change in the classroom routine:

A change in the classroom routine helps keep up the pupils' interest and group work allows a lot of flexibility in the arrangement of pairs or/and groups, the rhythm of the class and the type of activities chosen. Swaping the attention of the pupils from the teacher to the learners themselves adds variety to the class.

The classroom can be organised in a variety of ways, all involving pair or group work. The teacher can also make the best of:

- The use of the foreign language assistant, who either takes a small group out of the classroom or works with the classroom teacher.

- The use of the PALE machines: The PALE machines (Perimeter Audio-Learning Equipment) are widely used in the modern language classes of Lothian secondary schools. A number of individual listening/speaking posts (usually 8 or 9) are placed on the walls around the language classroom. Pupils can work individually or with up to 4 people. They can listen to a particular tape, or record conversations in groups or pairs.

D. Jones lists various advantages in his article, among which I would like to quote the following:
"It (The PALE unit system) has permitted pupils a more active approach to learning; in general, they are poor listeners and it is better for them to be engaged in activities rather than listening passively to their teacher.

- It has provided a stress-free environment in which pupils are not afraid to babble away in French

- Because pupils understand what is required of them, the chaotic scenes some teachers associate with group-work are avoided."

(p 69, "Self-Directed Learning and Assessment", Modern Languages in Scotland, No. 26)

(F) A change in the role of the teacher:

H. Cowie and J. Rudduck write:

"A teacher who has in his or her charge the progress of a number of small groups of children has first to be confident that the tasks set are clear and engaging. Pupils must understand the structure and timing of the session so that they can pace their work - they must also understand what demands will be made of them for sharing their work or reporting back on what they have done."

(p 21, Co-operative Group Work - An Overview)

If a teacher intends to set up pair/group work in his/her class, s/he will first have to introduce the activity, explain the aims and procedure very clearly, give an example, check that s/he made him/herself clear and then circulate around the groups to check that the students do the activity as expected and learn from it.

At the end of the activity, the teacher might ask a few pairs or groups to report to the whole class. S/he will go over the mistakes s/he has heard and taken note of when going around the groups and will clarify difficult points if necessary.
In their book *At the Chalkface* (p 24 and p 25), A. Matthews and C. Read list the following points as essential for pair work:

- careful preparation of the student
- pre-teaching of vocabulary
- clear instructions
- demonstration (teacher plays A and a good student B)
- cooperative atmosphere for mixed-ability class ("no magic solution", "foster as far as possible a cooperative atmosphere whereby better students are encouraged to help the less competent ones").
- no use of the mother tongue
- teacher's role:
  a. set up the activity
  b. check that each pair is doing what's expected
  c. circulate listening to as many pairs as possible
  d. on-the-spot corrections kept to the minimum. Teacher takes note of errors and will go over it later

A careful preparation of the students and the pre-teaching of vocabulary does not necessary have to be teacher-centred. The teacher might choose to do an elicitation presentation in order to involve the students actively from the very start of the class. Christopher Jones writes:

"Instead of telling learners about the new language items, the teacher provides suitable examples, and asks for their conclusions. The learner is thus given some 'law' to practise, but is using his intelligence and imagination to formulate the law for himself".

(p 91, "Teaching Techniques for Intermediate and Post-intermediate Learners", *Techniques of Teaching: From Theory to Practice*)

When pair/group work activities take place, the teacher does not interact directly with the pupils. S/he does not initiate or take part in the linguistic exchanges. Instead, s/he stays in the background available for assistance, reference and reassurance.
However, this is also the time when the teacher can give individual attention to the pupils and help a particular learner without having to slow down the rest of the class. This allows him/her to deal with mixed ability classes, adapting his/her teaching to the level of each pupil s/he assists.

Nevertheless, it is essential that the teacher does not spend too much time with one pair/group so that s/he can circulate around all the groups. Indeed I have found that pupils enjoy working together but find it more stimulating and motivating when the teacher works with them.

Therefore, it is indeed important to strike a balance between a strictly teacher-centred class where pupils may feel stressed by the "big brother" image and the fear of making mistakes in front of the whole class, and the other extreme where the teacher disappears totally and the pupils only work between themselves, without any teacher input or correction or encouragement, which can lead to the learners losing enthusiasm and motivation.

Mary Underwood writes:

"While students are doing pair/group work, you should circulate to listen and to give help where needed. It's best not to spend too long with one pair/group as this sometimes leads to others losing interest in the task as they feel you have lost interest in them".

(p 76, Chapter 7 "Pair and Group Work", Effective Class Management)

(G) A different approach to correcting mistakes:

The topic of correction in modern language learning cannot be dissociated from the notions of accuracy (when the emphasis is on the linguistic forms and the correctness of language structure) and fluency (when the emphasis is on communication rather than correctness). In books and papers these two notions always seem to be contrasted with each other: It seems that one can focus on one or the other but not on both at the same time.
Michael Lewis writes:

"Don't over-correct. Teachers sometimes feel unhappy if they do not correct - they feel they are not doing their job. It is important to remember that learning a language is about fluency and accuracy - but there is no evidence that you need accuracy first - on the contrary there is a good deal of evidence that worrying too much about accuracy early on prevents students ever becoming fluent".

(p 43, "Doing Small Thing Well", Techniques of Teaching: From Theory to Practice)

Indeed, it seems important to focus both on accuracy and fluency from the very beginning. Many pupils come to the modern language class with prejudices, one of them being that it is essential that they do not make mistakes and that their teacher is there to correct every mistake they make.

When pupils are working in pairs/groups, the teacher circulates to help them, to assess the difficulty of the task and to take note of the mistakes made to correct them after completion of the task in order not to interrupt the flow of the activity. Indeed, the idea is that it is important that the learners experience with language and that they get used not to rely on the teacher's approval all the time. Unfortunately, this method of correcting has the disadvantage that the lack of immediate correction or feedback can frustrate the learners who might lose interest in the activity and feel that their teacher is not "doing his/her job properly".

Of course, the teacher might choose to correct some mistakes s/he hears on the spot. However, in that case, his/her corrections are unfortunately only heard by the members of one pair or group rather than by the whole class, and that is a pity!

When working in pairs or groups, away from the teacher's control, pupils often correct each other. This is mostly positive, but it can also happen that some pupils do not easily accept to be corrected by other pupils, who might not always do it in a kind or patient way. This can be a source of unnecessary stress and distress.
(H) Different types of activities in the classroom:

Group-work activities can vary considerably. William Littlewood distinguishes two main areas:

- **Pre-communicative activities:**

  "...that is, they aim to equip the learner with some of the skills for communication, without requiring him to perform communicative acts."

  *(p 8, Littlewood, W., *Communicative Language Teaching - An Introduction*).*

These range from audio-lingual drills (reacting to stimuli), fashionable at the end of the 1960's where the focus is on the performance of structural operations only, or more communicatively where partners interact in a linguistic exchange in a cued or open dialogue on a question and answer mode when the work in pairs takes place away from the teacher's control and where the activities are based on an information gap.

- **Communicative activities**: These can be 'functional communication activities' or 'social interaction activities':

  - 'functional communication activities':

    "The principle underlying functional communication activities is that the teacher structures the situation so the learners have to overcome an information gap or solve a problem."

    *(Littlewood, W., book as above, p 22)*

Therefore, the language is used to share and process information. A social dimension is added in the next stage:
- 'Social interaction activities':

"This means that learners must pay greater attention to the social as we. as the functional meanings that language conveys. It also means that the activities approximate more closely to the kind of communication situation encountered outside the classroom, where language is not only a functional instrument, but also a form of social behaviour".

(Littlewood, W., book as above, p 43)

Pair/group work can be used at every stage of learning, from a very controlled activity such as a pre-communicative activity to a social interaction activity such as improvisation.

W. Littlewoods writes:

"Improvisation, too, is closely associated with work in the native language context, notably in drama. It is the last type of role-playing activity to be discussed in this chapter, and the least controlled. Learners are often presented only with a stimulus-situation, which they can interpret and exploit in any way they wish. In this type of activity, there is no limitation to the structures or vocabulary that will be used by the students. The activity is certainly communicative. It encourages fluency but does not focus on accuracy".

(Littlewood, W., book as above, pp 59-60)

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ACCURACY                  FLUENCY

(Littlewood, W., p 50)

Multi-skill approach: Of course, pair/group work can be chosen to practise speaking, listening, reading and/or writing.
(I) A new perspective on the grading and the testing of activities:

**Grading:** There is no particular difficulty in grading activities if the pair/group work is rather controlled such as performing memorised dialogues, contextualised drills or cued dialogues. However it is impossible to know for sure the direction a role-play or improvisation activity will take. Therefore the teacher has control over the freedom that is given to the student and the topic chosen but s/he has no strict control over the linguistic exchanges that take place in the classroom.

**Testing:** Two main areas should be considered: content and format.

- **Content:** A test must reflect what has been covered in the class. It must not introduce anything new. However, as we have seen in the previous section "Grading", it is not always possible for the teacher to appreciate the exact content of the linguistic interactions taking place in the classroom with pair/group work. Therefore, the teacher can make note of the mistakes made when going around groups, the range of language used etc., arrange for feedback sessions involving the whole class and then design suitable tests.

- **Format:** The testing procedure should not be unusual to the students. On the contrary, it should be similar in format to the type of activities performed regularly in the language class. Therefore, if an emphasis is usually put on pair/group work, then it should be reflected in the testing. Research is still under way today to set up tests which acknowledge this change in classroom interactions. Individual tests can be replaced by tests in pairs or groups: I have seen this type of testing used in the two schools that I have visited this year.

Nick Kenny writes:

"Groupwork and pairwork, moreover, allow the tester to assume a purely observational role, and so to reduce the level to which his or her presence intrudes on the proceedings. Students are more likely to use spontaneous language when speaking to their contemporaries than to an examiner, and the tests set can stimulate the use of varieties of language. Groupwork or
pairwork also have the advantage of making a better use of time unlike a one-to-one interview allowing the oral test to utilize more student speaking time, and so increasing its face validity for the students".

p 140, "Toward Communicative Oral Testing", *Techniques of Teaching: from Theory to Practice*

What Nick Kenny does not mention in his paper is how the pairing is done for the testing. Do good students pair together and less able students together or do students pair up at random? It seems to me that the first possibility would be more suitable as it would allow the testers to assess the real level of each student more accurately. However, pupils might prefer to work with a friend, regardless of each other's level.
PART TWO:
MY OWN INVESTIGATION ON GROUP WORK

The aim of my research was to study the importance of pair/group work in the classroom and then to find out what pupils and teachers thought about it. I took notes when observing various modern language classes and gave out questionnaires to pupils and teachers. When formulating my questionnaires, I had the choice to either ask questions for which the pre-formulated answers just needed to be ticked or to leave the questions open, leaving the teachers or pupils free to formulate their thoughts themselves. I have opted for this second option in an attempt to avoid putting words into people's mouth.

I have attached the 3 questionnaires in Annex and I recommend the reader to refer to the questionnaires for the exact wording of the questions as I have sometimes shortened them for practical purposes when reporting on the results.

1) CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS:

Let us have a look at

1. What I have observed in the modern language class in Lasswade High School and Craigmount High School:

- A lot of pair work with activities such as:

  - Talk to your partner for 1 minute.

  - Tell your partner one word in English, s/he gives you the French for it.

  - Role-play a conversation at the station, the hotel, etc and record it (using the PALE equipment) and/or write it down.

  - Role-play the oral examination of the Standard Grade or the Higher for practice.

  - Do an exercise (translation, essay writing, vocabulary search, etc). You can ask your partner for help if you want.
- Surveys, questionnaires and interviews: pupils ask each other about a particular topic.

- Paul Jones: Pupils go into 2 circles, the inside circle and the outside circle. The pupils on the inside circle ask the pupils on the outside circle what they have done at the week-end for instance, the other pupils answer. When the teacher claps her/his hands, the inside circle moves to the left, the interactions start again with different pairs.

- Some group work:

  - Discussions in 3 groups on a particular topic (preparation for the oral of the Higher examination): 1 group with the class teacher, 1 with the assistant, 1 with the student teacher.

  - Drama activities: pupils go into groups and improvise little scenes. Free improvisation.

  - The foreign language assistant takes out groups of pupils to do a speaking activity.

2. What I have also observed:

- People sitting in groups and not working in groups.

- People sitting in groups but occasionally working in pairs, never in groups.

I saw much less pair or group work than I expected: The 'lockstep' approach was the most used as well as the pupils working individually.

3. Comments:

Pair work was more extensively used than group work.

Pupils usually worked with the pupils they sat next to. They chose their seats. Therefore, they indirectly chose their partner.

Pupils I saw working in pairs or groups always seemed to enjoy it.
There did not seem to be more discipline problems when pair/group work was under way in the classroom.

The pupils seemed very keen to use the PALE machines (see page 10).

2) RESEARCH BASED ON DATA COLLECTED FROM QUESTIONNAIRES

I made 3 questionnaires.

(A) The first one was a very general questionnaire about what second year pupils thought about their school education in general. Only one question concerned group work:

Do you like working in groups, or individually?

16 pupils said they liked "working in groups", 7 "individually" and 3 said they "did not mind".

(B) In the second questionnaire I surveyed group work specifically. The class I studied was a third year class. (When many pupils have given the same answer or a very similar one, I have put a little asterix *)

1. Do you prefer to work individually, in pairs or in groups of 3, 4 or more?

16 pupils said they preferred to work "in pairs", 7 "in groups of 3, 4 or more", 5 said "in pairs or in groups of 3, 4 or more", and Only one pupil said he or she preferred to work "individually".

2. Can you explain why?

In pairs:

"You can get better conversation and work", "It's good fun, no mockabout (well, not always!)", "Combined knowledge of French", "You can help each other, discuss ideas"., "There aren't too many different opinions", "You usually get to work with someone you like", "Not embarassing".
"Easier to talk to one pupil instead of to the teacher or the whole class",
"Working with too many people can be noisy",
"You can ask your partner when you don't know something without the whole class knowing",
"When there are 3 or 4 you normally end up talking and on my own I get stuck",
(One pupil did not answer).

- In groups:

"You can get a better understanding of things",
"More interesting",
"More fun and interesting",
"More enjoyable and you can help each other",
"You can learn from the others by listening to them, and you can combine ideas to form a better one",
(One pupil did not answer).

- In pairs or groups of 3, 4 or more:

"If you get stuck you can help each other out",
"It is more fun",
"You can discuss your work",
"You have more chance to solve things that you are doing wrong",
"You can put both, or all your knowledge of French together and do better"

- Individually:

"I feel it's my own work and I learn better"

3. How do you think you work best? (individually, in pairs, in groups)?

19 said they worked best in pairs,
2 "in groups or pairs",
5 "in groups",
3 "individually" ("because there is no need for discussion with a partner", "better when writing but it helps to have people to talk to")
4. Do you sometimes think that you waste time in the language class?

4 pupils said "no",
7 "sometimes",
18 said "yes".

5. If yes, when?

"When tired",
"When we do poems... I think poetry is a waste of time",
"When I can",
"When I don't like what we are doing",
"Recently when playing games",
"After hard and complicated work I lose concentration",
"At the start the teacher tells us to carry on with work, we don't have any work to do",
"When the teacher talks a lot in French and we don't understand what he is saying",
"All the time",
"Period 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7",
"When we are doing something boring - which is almost always",
"When in a large group of people",
"When I do not understand the work",
"Mostly on Fridays before the bell, I can't be bothered working for the last 10 minutes. It depends if it's interesting",
"When I'm tired",
"When I'm trying to understand something but nobody seems to be able to explain it to me",
(3 pupils did not give reasons).

5. Do you think there is too much noise in the language class?

4 pupils said "sometimes",
3 said yes ("definitely", "yes sometimes it's hard to concentrate",
"all the time"),
22 said "no".
Why?

- **Sometimes:**
  
  "Because some people talk a lot*,
  "I don't know*."

- **Yes:**
  
  "Sometimes people talk at once*, *
  "I can work in pairs with a lot of background noise and most of it
    is probably me*,
  "Because not everyone talks and when they do it doesn't put me off.
    If there was no noise I would feel uncomfortable*."

- **No:**
  
  "I can work easily*,
  "Because it's quiet compared to other classes*,
  "The noise is mostly people speaking in French, or discussing the
    French in English*, *
  "You need to talk in French classes*,
  "Not a lot of talking is allowed*, *
  "If the class is silent, I'll get even more bored and give up*.
  "Because you need to discuss thing*.
  "It is important to discuss things and talk in the language which
    you are learning and this is often done in pairs, so you talk
    fairly quietly*.
  "I think it's quite quiet, and the noise there is gives a good
    atmosphere*.
  "I find it easier to work with a background noise*, *
  "We should do more talking just to everyone in the class*.
  "Because the talking all adds to learning more French*.
  "Cos it's quiet*.
  "I think most of the class want to work, so get on with it*.
6. Do you like using the PALE machines?

3 pupils said "no",
5 said "sometimes",
3 said they "did not mind" ("they're OK", "not bothered", "don't mind"),
18 said "yes".

Why?

- **No:**

"We should do more talking just to everyone in the class",
"The people on the machines speak too fast",
"Don't like speaking on them".

- **Yes, sometimes:**

"Can chat with my friends",
"I don't like speaking because I get embarrassed",
"I like speaking to my friend",
"You usually get to hear French spoken well so it helps your pronunciation".

- **Don't mind:**

"You don't normally have to write loads of French, just translate or speak",
"Different from the normal way of teaching",
"It isn't much different from playing a tape on a stereo or talk in the classroom in pairs",

- **Yes:**

"I chat and have a laugh",
"Have fun",
"I chat with my friends",
"It is easier to talk with a partner and see what it sounds like",
"Interesting: I like listening to accent, easy to hear mistakes, good fun",
"They allow you to practise your French and record yourself so that you can listen to mistakes and improve your speaking"
"You can pretend you're a plane pilot and your pal is the navigator", "It's enjoyable to listen to French tapes and make French dialogues", "You work well", "Work well, doing something you like", "You hear French and if you don't understand a bit you can rewind it and listen again", "I admit I speak in English but I hear what I need to improve speakingwise," "You can play yourself back and listen to yourself in French".

7. Do you prefer to choose your partner(s) or when your teacher chooses for you?

1 said s/he prefers when the "teacher chooses", 1 said s/he was "not bothered", 27 said they prefer to "choose their own partner".

Why?

- **Teacher chooses:**

  "You work with people you don't really know"

- **Not bothered:**

  (No reason given).

- **Pupils choose:**

  "I like to go with a friend", "I work better with a person I know well", "I may be put with someone I don't like or don't know", "With people you know I am more experimental", "I can work better when I am relaxed with someone I know", "You know who you get on with and work well with, teachers can put you with people who you don't like and don't get on with so you don't work well", "You may end up being partners with someone you don't like or don't get on well with", "Some people in the class are excellent at French and I feel embarassed also I don't know them well".
"You don't feel awkward",
"You can co-operate with people who you like better",
"Don't like the folk in this class, with the exception of some",
"I don't know everyone in the class and I prefer working with my friends",
"If I get someone who I don't know very well, I don't feel easy if I make a fool of myself".

8. Do you work in pairs/groups in the language class more than in other subjects?

12 "yes",
12 "no",
4 "not really" (1 mentioned the drama class, 1 the English class)
(1 did not answer)

9. Do you like turning your back to the teacher when sitting in groups?

1 pupil did not understand the question,
1 said it was not relevant,
8 said they did not mind ("I don't mind because the teacher always walks round the groups"...),
5 said "yes" ("I don't have to look at his/her ugly face"...I),
13 said "no" ("no, because they can creep upon you", "no, you feel like you are being watched by them", "I don't like turning your head all the time", "no, as you can't really see what he/she is doing", "I want to be able to see and hear the teacher when being taught but not necessarily all the time", "no because if s/he is speaking French I cannot see the mouth action").

10. Do you think your teacher is more relaxed and happy when the pupils work individually, or in pairs/groups?

1 pupils said that the teacher is never relaxed or happy!
1 said s/he did not notice the difference
6 said "in pairs or groups" ("because she/he does not have to keep telling us to be quiet", "because the teacher doesn't have to teach the whole class for a whole lesson" ").
21 said "individually" ("we make less noise for him, some people just use group work just to talk", "quiet", "we are more likely to get on with our work", "they don't have to check that you're talking about French and not other things with your group/partner", "you don't talk as much and you probably work better", "we don't talk so much but I don't like working on my own").

(C) My last questionnaire was for teachers. I wanted to find out how they used pair and groups work in the classroom.

I handed out 6 questionnaires to the modern language teachers of my last placement school. Unfortunately, only 4 teachers returned their questionnaires.

1. How often do you make your pupils work individually or in groups?
   - Individually: 1 teacher said "very often", 3 "regularly",
   - In pairs: 4 "regularly"
   - In groups of 3 or 4: 2 "regularly", 1 "sometimes", 1 (no answer)
   - In bigger groups: 1 "rarely", 1 "regularly", 1 "very often".

2. Can you give a rough percentage of the time you allocate to each activity?

   - One teacher said: whole class teaching: 30%
     individual work: 30%
     pair work: 20%
     groups of 3 or 4: 20%

   - Another teacher said: individual work: 25%
     pair work: 25%
     groups of 3 or 4: 10%
     bigger groups 40%

   - Another teacher said: individual work: 25%
     pair work: 25%
     bigger groups: 50%

   - Another teacher said: groups of 3 or 4: 50%
3. Do you use the PALE machines?

- 2 teachers said "once a week or more",
- 2 teachers do not have PALE machines in their classroom.

4. Please give a rough percentage of how you use the PALE machines:

- 1 teacher said: for listening activities: 60%
  for speaking activities: 40%
- The other teacher said: for listening activities: 50%
  for speaking activities: 50%

5. Do you have pupils work in pairs, individually or in groups?
(Unfortunately, my question was badly formulated, it was not clear either I referred to the PALE machines or not)

- One teacher said: in pairs: 25%
  individually: 25%
  in groups 50%
- The other teacher said: in pairs: "oral: always, listening: often"
  individually: "listening: flexible",
  in groups: "never".

6. Do you think that the PALE machines are important for pair/group work? Why?

- 2 teachers said yes: "They can monitor their performance",
  "Allow for communication".
- One of the teachers who has not got PALE machines in her room mentioned: "useful for listening".
Do you think they are important for language teaching/learning? Why?

The two teachers who have PALE machines said:

- "Yes: Allow for independence from teacher. Allow for individual work, several activities in one class. Add variety, encourage motivation and responsibility".

- "If teaching in groups, children need to have access to listening/speaking activities for these occasions when they are not with the teacher".

The two teachers who do not have PALE machines said:

- "Useful but not essential - my pupils manage without them. They speak to each other, not into machines - eyeball to eyeball contact".

- "Give exposure to genuine conversation exchanges".

7. Do you think the PALE machines are a net improvement over the traditional language lab or a simple tape recorder used for the whole class? Why?

The two teachers who have PALE machines said:

- "Pupils can work more or less at their own pace. Small groups at a time unlike labs".

- "Yes".

The two teachers who do not have PALE machines said:

- "Yes. But there is a place for whole class listening too".

- "Simple tape cannot be rewound etc... as each individual requires".

8. Do you use self-access material with your classes?

- One teacher said: whole class teaching: 50%
  individual work: 50%
- Another said: whole class teaching: 95%
learner directed learning: 5%
individual work: 60%
team teaching: whenever possible.

- Another said: whole class teaching: 15%
learner directed learning: 85%
team teaching: 25%

- Another said: whole class teaching: 75%
learner directed learning: 25%
team teaching: 15%

(I'm afraid only one teacher gave percentages which really add up to 100%).

9. When you put pupils in groups, how do you group them?

- One teacher said: "At random".

- One said: "Pupils of similar levels".

- One ticked all the possibilities: "At random", "they choose who they will work with", "pupils of similar levels", "a fast learner with a slower one", "by sex".

- One said: "They choose who they will work with for oral work", "pupils of similar levels: sometimes for reading". "Pupils choose at first, only moved if distracting others".

10. Do you choose the seating of your pupils or not?

"No": 2 teachers
1 "initially yes"
1 did not answer

11. Do they have the same seats all through the year?

All 4 teachers said "usually yes".
12. Is noise a problem when you do group work:
   - "No",
   - "Not much",
   - "Sometimes",
   - "Yes."

13. Is discipline a problem when you do group work?
   - "No",
   - "No",
   - "More difficult than whole class teaching",
   - "Sometimes."

14. Do you think the pupils enjoy working in groups or not?
   - "Some enjoy the language work, for others it's a chance to chat",
   - "Some do, some don't, individual preferences, some prefer the teacher all the time",
   - "Yes, they are more involved, doing rather than observing a lesson"
   - (One teacher did not answer).

15. Do you think that your colleagues share the same views than you on group work?
   - "No",
   - "Not all",
   - "Some do",
   - "Some more enthusiastic than others."

16. What do you think the advantages of group work are in the language class?
   - "Everyone has a chance to practise their conversation",
   - "Mainly in the oral sphere - role playing/sketches",
   - "More teacher contact allows teaching different levels of pupils, more intimate relationships",
   - "Sometimes easier to teach a certain point to small groups. When doing speaking activities pupils have to say more"
17. What do you think the disadvantages of group work are in the language class?

- "I am not in control of the amount/quality of learning."
- "Less teacher control of work covered - this is not necessarily a bad thing."
- "Difficult for 1 teacher to be 'on call' to 5/6 groups - Junior classes usually 30 pupils (time wasting by some?)",
- "Sometimes noise."

3) COMMENTS:

What surprises me in the data that I have gathered from the questionnaires is to see that they really illustrate my first part (review of literature). I often think that there is a gap between theory and practice but when I compare what has been written on group work with the information collected in the questionnaire, I am pleased to see that they usually agree with each other.

All authors I read mention that pupils enjoy group work. This was confirmed by the questionnaires.

I must say that I was struck by the maturity and lucidity some pupils showed when commenting on pair or group work:

"Combined knowledge of French", "you can get a better understanding of things", "you can discuss your work", "because the talking all adds to learning more French", "different from the normal way of teaching", etc...

Only 2 answers out of all the 270 answers provided were a bit immature:

"You can pretend you're a plane pilot and your pal is the navigator", "yes, I don't have to look at his/her ugly face" (that was in answer to the following question: Do you like turning your back to the teacher when sitting in groups?) !
The pupils often refered to the characteristics we looked at in PART ONE of this project:

Intensity of involvement: "You can get better conversations and work", "You need to talk in French classes".

More natural interactions and individualisation: "Easier to talk to one pupil instead of to the teacher or to the class", "Not embarassing", "I don't know everyone in the class and I prefer working with my friends".

Co-operation: "You can help each other, discuss ideas", "You can learn from the others by listening to them, and you can combine ideas to form a better one", "You can co-operate with people who you like better".

Change in the classroom routine: "It's good fun", "I find it easier to work with a background noise".

A change in the role of the teacher and different types of activities in the classroom: "I like speaking to my friends", "Different from the normal way of teaching", "We should do more talking just to everyone in the class".

A different approach to correcting mistakes: "(About the PALM machines) "Interesting: I like listening to accents, easy to hear mistakes, good fun", "They (the PALM machines) allow you to practise your French and record yourself so that you can listen to mistakes and improve your speaking", "I admit I speak in English but I hear what I need to improve speakingwise".

I was interested to read that the majority of the pupils, although they prefer to work in pairs or groups said that they think that their teacher is happier when they work individually: "We make less noise for him", "You don't talk as much and you probably work better"...

I was surprised to see that only 1 pupils out of 27 preferred to work individually: "I feel it's my own and I learn better". I was really surprised to see that most pupils enjoyed pair and group work so much.
When we look at the teachers' views on group work, it seems that their opinions are quite similar. For example, the proportion of classroom time allocated to group work is quite similar: 75%, 75%, 60% and 50%. All teachers seemed to agree on the value of the PALE machines although one teacher in particular felt strongly that they are useful but not essential: "My pupils manage without them. They speak to each other, not into machines - eyeball to eyeball contact".

Teachers seemed to have the same attitude to the grouping of their pupils. Usually they let the pupils choose their partner/seat, and would move them only if necessary.

Opinions differed slightly regarding noise and discipline problems and the question either pupils enjoy group work or not.

When it came to discuss whole-class teaching, some results were very different: one teacher taught the whole class 95% of the time, another one 75%, another 50% of the time, another 15%.

I was surprised to see that most teachers seemed to think that their colleagues don't really share the same views than them on group work.

However, they all agreed on the value of group work (see question 16) and three of them mentioned that the drawback of group work is (or can be) the lack of teacher control, the other teacher mentioning that noise was a problem.

The data collected in these questionnaires could be studied in great detail. I hope that one day, I will be able to carry out this investigation further, spending more time on drawing conclusions from my investigations and involving more pupils and more teachers in order to get a more accurate idea of what they all think about pair/group work. Unfortunately, the length of this project does not allow me to do this extra work just now!
CONCLUSION:

I have found the topic of pair/group work fascinating. I have enjoyed reading about it, writing about it, talking about it with various people and learning about it.

Doing this project has helped me understand my first reaction of rejection to pair/group work. It was the fear of losing control.

However, if the teacher cannot limit the linguistic content of pair/group work activities (unless they are very controlled), s/he can choose the type of activities, the time spent on the activities, how to pair or group the students, make sure s/he comes around all the groups so that nobody feels left out, give feedback on correction to every pair/group observed or as much as possible, make sure that s/he knows the aims and objectives of the activity all the time and also ensure that the pupils know the purpose and procedure of the activity all the time: HOW and WHAT to practise. Indeed, the teacher is in control of how well pair/group work takes place even if she is not in control of all the linguistic interactions. And this is because of this lack of linguistic control and the related problems such as correction, grading, etc., that it is important not to set improvisation activities too often so that the pupils do not feel that they are left to drift away.

The aim is to define and reach an equilibrium between control and freedom, accuracy and fluency, a balance between discipline and improvisation. There are no set rules. It depends on the pupils, the teacher and how well they know each other.

Well, pair/group work is very interesting, very enjoyable, demanding and definitely subtle. The teacher must be a professional, a very good organiser and a bit of an artist, like the conductor of an orchestra trying to make all his/her musicians play in harmony. It does not always work, sometimes it can be cacophonous but if everybody works at it and gets used to working together, it can be one of the most efficient and enjoyable ways of learning.

I am convinced. Are you?!!...
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX

Page No:

(i) General pupils' questionnaire

(Only question 7 relates to Group Work)

(iii) Pupils' questionnaire on Group Work

(iv) Teachers' questionnaire on Group Work
DO NOT WRITE YOUR NAME! PLEASE ANSWER AS YOU PLEASE!

1. Name of one of your best friends:

2. Name of somebody you do not talk to very much:

3. What is your favourite subject?
   Why?

4. What is the subject you like best?
   Why?

5. Do you feel tired at school?
   When?
   Why?

6. Do you think you learn at school?
   In what subjects do you learn best?
   Why?
   In what subjects do you feel you don't learn much?
   Why?

7. Do you like working in groups or individually?

8. Do you like when the class is totally silent and you have to listen to the teacher or do a writing or reading activity?

9. Do you like school?

10. What would you like to see improved at school?

12. What do you think student teachers should know before becoming teachers? What would you like them to know to make sure their pupils will be happy?

13. What do you think of noise at school? Do you think there is too much noise? If yes, where and when?

14. Do you like school dinners?

15. Do you have time to relax at lunch time?

16. Do you eat enough at lunch time?

17. Do you like the food at the canteen?

18. Do you bring your own packed lunch? Why?

20. Do you eat the same food at school and at home?

21. What are the differences?

22. Do you prefer school time or holidays?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE PUPILS

GROUP WORK

1. Do you prefer to work individually, in pairs or in groups of 3, 4 or more?

2. Can you explain why?

3. How do you think you work best? (individually, in pairs, in groups)?

4. Do you sometimes think that you waste time in the language class?

5. If yes, when?

6. Do you think there is too much noise in the language class?

   Why?

7. Do you like using the PALE machines?

   Why? (you work well, you speak a lot, you chat with your friends...?)

8. Do you work in pairs/groups in the language class more than in other subjects?

9. Do you prefer to choose your partner(s) or when you teacher chooses for you?

   Why?

10. Do you think your teacher is more relaxed and happy when the pupils work individually, or in pairs/groups?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. AU REVOIR.
GROUP WORK

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE LANGUAGE TEACHERS OF
CRAIGMOUNT HIGH SCHOOL

DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE. THANK YOU!

1. How often do you make your pupils work individually or in groups (please tick)?

   individually
   in pairs
   in groups of 3 or 4
   in bigger groups

2. Can you give a rough percentage of the time you allocate to each activity?

   individual work:
   pair work:
   groups of 3 or 4:
   bigger groups:

3. Do you use the PALE machines: (please tick or give a comment)

   for every class?
   once a week or more?
   between less than once a week and once a fortnight?
   more rarely?

4. Please give a rough percentage of how you use the PALE machines:

   for listening activities:
   for speaking activities:

5. Do you have pupils work... (please give percentage)

   in pairs?
   individually?
   in groups (up to 4)?

6. Do you think that the PALE machines are important for pair/group work? Why?

   Do you think they are important for language teaching/learning? Why?
7. Do you think the PALE machines are a net improvement over the traditional language lab or a simple tape recorder used for the whole class? Why?

8. Do you use self-access material with your classes? Please give percentages of:
   
   Teacher directed learning (whole class teaching):
   
   learner directed learning (self-access material, over a period of a few weeks):
   
   individual work (as above but single pieces of work for one lesson only):
   
   team teaching (with assistant or other):

9. When you put pupils in groups, how do you group them?
   
   at random?
   
   they choose who they will work with?
   
   pupils of similar levels?
   
   a fast learner with a slower one?
   
   by sex?

10. Do you choose the seating of your pupils or not?

11. Do they have the same seats all through the year? If not, can you explain?

12. Is noise a problem when you do group work?

13. Is discipline a problem when you do group work?

14. Do you think the pupils enjoy working in groups or not? Can you explain?

15. Do you think that your colleagues share the same views than you on group work?

16. What do you think the advantages of group work are in the language class?

17. What do you think the disadvantages of group work are in the language class?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

You can give it back to me on Thursday 26th March or send it to me:

François Gailly,
1 Valleyfield Street,
EDINBURGH EH3 9LP

Cheerio! Au revoir! Auf Wiedersehen!