Collaborative Learning: Increasing Students' Engagement Outside the Classroom

Rosario Hernández

University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Several factors, including the Bologna process, the embargo on university posts and a larger student population pursuing degrees, have contributed to radical changes in teaching, learning and assessment in Irish higher education in the last few years. Challenges to academics have resulted in curriculum reform and, most importantly, in innovative practices in which the curriculum is delivered and assessed. It was in this context that a collaborative component has been introduced into Level 2 Spanish language modules at University College Dublin. A small action research project has been undertaken to explore the students' views about this innovative way of learning. This article addresses the extent to which collaborative learning outside the classroom contributes to the enhancement of student learning and it examines the obstacles encountered by the students during the semester. The discussion of the findings focuses on feedback from the students and on group reflections submitted via Blackboard, the university's VLE (virtual learning environment).

Keywords: collaborative learning, learning tasks, self-directed learning

Introduction

Collaborative learning has proved a difficult concept to define (Panitz, 1996). Although it is sometimes used interchangeably with cooperative learning (Smith, 1996), many researchers draw a distinction between these concepts. In an attempt to differentiate the two terms, Panitz (1996) asserts that collaborative learning is "a personal philosophy" based on consensus building. Dillenbourg (1999) adds that collaborative learning involves two or more people sharing responsibility, taking collective decisions and acting together in order to learn something together. On the other hand, cooperative learning is defined as the structure that usually requires a series of steps that helps people to achieve "a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific" (Panitz, 1996). In collaborative learning, the emphasis is on the process of working together while the achievement of the product is central to cooperative learning. However, it is evident throughout the literature that not all scholars make such distinctions between these two concepts. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we accept that for many practitioners cooperative and collaborative learning are used interchangeably.

Collaborative learning includes a wide range of approaches that differ with regard to the amount of in-class and out-of-class time devoted to group work. The activities can involve face-to-face conversations, and/or the use of computers to conduct discussions (online forums, social media networks, etc.). Irrespective of the teaching approach adopted, collaboration among learners and/or between learners and the teacher

---

constitutes an integral element in language learning. PBL (problem-based learning), project work and task-based learning are examples of collaborative learning.

Numerous studies on collaborative learning have focused on its implementation in the classroom (Ning, 2011; Vázquez, 2011; Wiersema, 2000), on how online technologies facilitate collaborative blended learning (Berndt, 2011; Esteves, 2011; Perifanou & Costa, 2009; Rüschoff, 2009) or on how to enhance collaboration in distance education courses (Daradoumis, & Marquès, 2000). Less attention has been given to research focussed on the attitudes of learners towards collaborative learning tasks outside the classroom with a view to improving the experience of collaborative student learning. Thus, the focus of this article is on collaborative learning outside the classroom through teamwork, research and self-directed study.

Literature Review

Collaborative learning epitomizes the social constructivist perspective on learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the importance of others, including teachers, as mediators of learning. He claims that learning originates from internalising meaning during social interaction while using relevant "scaffolding" within the "Zone of Proximal Development". The concept of "scaffolding" as understood by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) asserted that in social interaction, most advanced learners can create supporting conditions for the learning of less competent learners. Walker (2001) found that in tandem learning, when native speakers of two different languages work together to learn each other's language and develop knowledge of the target culture, both partners benefit from the experience.

Collaborative learning goes beyond working together; it requires team-work with roles defined to ensure the success of the group (Domingo, 2008). Lizzio and Wilson (2006) point out that factors contributing to the effectiveness of collaboration include team-building activities, frequency of meetings and the value that individuals place on the process of learning (goal orientation). The ultimate aim is for students to develop the ability to become autonomous learners (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Despite the increased interest in autonomy as a defining goal of self-directed language learning (Little, 2007; Smith, 2008), Little (2007, p. 15) argued that "the practical realisation of language learner autonomy remains elusive". On the other hand, self-directed learning, described by Knowles (1975) as being concerned with learner-lead decisions regarding planning, monitoring and evaluation of their own learning, can be more easily examined. Although self-directed learning is regarded a central concept in education, some critics argue that most of the concept's emphasis has been on external control and management of the learning tasks (Garrison, 1997; Silén & Uhlin, 2008). Garrison (1997) proposes a self-directed model that integrates self-management (contextual control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility) and motivational dimensions (perceived value of the learning). In self-directed learning, students have to display greater awareness of their responsibility as learners by managing their learning and self-monitoring themselves. In short, it requires personal reflection.

In recent years, universities have stressed the value of "working with others" as a core skill required for employment. University College Dublin in its Strategic Plan for 2014 describes academic excellence "with an aptitude for continued, self-directed and collaborative learning in academic and professional settings" as one of its key graduate attributes (University College Dublin, 2010, p. 14).

This article outlines in what follows the findings of a small study that examines the extent to which collaboration outside the classroom involves learners sharing responsibility and taking collective decisions to

demonstrate speaking and listening skills in Spanish.

Context for the Study

In 2005 under a new management team, University College Dublin underwent radical reform, both at structural and curriculum levels. The university's goal was to become more efficient and to align itself to the Bologna Declaration, which was signed in the Italian city of Bologna in 1999 (European Ministers of Education, 1999). The Bologna Process aims to create a EHEA (European Higher Education Area) based on international cooperation and to facilitate mobility of students, graduates and higher education staff (The Bologna Secretariat, 2012). The major restructuring of faculties and academic departments was taken in parallel with an even greater curriculum and resourcing reform of every programme within the university. While this process had its opponents and challenges, neither of which could be ignored, the new curriculum provided opportunities for learning that were previously absent. Some of the opportunities that are worth highlighting are:

(1) greater engagement of students in the learning process (learning outcomes);

(2) freedom for academics to introduce several assessment strategies;

(3) greater use of the VLE (virtual learning environment) (Blackboard).

Among the challenges faced were:

(1) fewer in-classroom teaching hours per module;

(2) how to develop ways of facilitating student self-directed learning outside the classroom.

In an effort to translate the opportunities listed above into pedagogical practices for the language modules, and to face the challenges posed by the reduction in the number of teaching hours per week from four to two, an individual project was incorporated into Level 1 Spanish language modules in 2006. Students were required to research a cultural topic related to the contents of the modules and submit the outcomes of their work in the form of a written portfolio at the end of the semester. As a means of preparing students for the introduction of self-directed learning at Level 2, an online survey of students who have completed Level 2 modules was undertaken in June 2010. Those students had experienced project work in Level 1 but not in Level 2. The study revealed that although some students thought it was hard work, most of them valued the project as a good activity that contributed to self-directed learning, the development of research skills, as well as improving their reading and writing in Spanish (Hernández, 2010).

Participants and Research Question

The findings of the research conducted in June 2010 provided the platform for the development of self-directed learning outside the classroom in Level 2 language modules. As a result, a collaborative learning component was introduced during semester 2 of the academic year 2010−2011. This article focuses on collaborative work carried out during semester 2 of the 2010−2011 academic year, and during the two semesters of the year 2011−2012. A total of five modules were used to conduct this research.

The collaborative work required in each of the modules was slightly different as it was linked to the specific contents of each of the modules and their learning outcomes. In two of the modules, groups had to work on a topic, chosen out of four, to deliver an oral group presentation at the end of the semester. In two other modules, groups were involved in the development and marketing of a business idea and present the outcomes in an oral presentation at the end of the semester. The collaborative work for the fifth module required groups to work with a series video clips on cultural and current Hispanic topics to develop listening

skills to be tested in an audiovisual task at the end of the semester.

In order to carry out the collaborative project, students were randomly placed in groups of 4 or 5. Instructions about the collaborative assignment were presented to all students in class, as well as made available via Blackboard (VLE). It was left to each group to organise themselves and agree on the method of working. The only compulsory element was that they had to report the work in progress at least once per month, totalling to four times during the semester, using the group journal in the university's VLE. Each participant was rewarded with 5% of the total module marks if the four reports were submitted indicating that all members had contributed to the group work. The four modules taught during semester 2 required each group to deliver an oral presentation in Spanish while, for the module taught during semester 1, students had to demonstrate the collaborative work done during the semester in an audiovisual task at the end of the semester. Twenty-five percent of the total module marks was given to each student individually based on their performance on the audiovisual task (semester 1). Twenty-five percent was also awarded to the oral group presentation (semester 2) where marks were allocated both for the group work and individual performance using an assessment grid for each student. An action research study was undertaken with the view to improve the learning experience of students of Spanish. This study set out to establish the impact that collaborative work outside the classroom had on student learning by focusing on two key issues:

(1) the attitudes of students towards the learning process through collaborative work;

(2) the management of self-directed work within the groups.

Methods and Data Collection

For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, the five modules used for this study will not be identified and will be referred to as Mod-A and Mod-B (semester 2, 2010−2011), Mod-C (semester 1, 2011−2012) and Mod-D and Mod-E (semester 2, 2011−2012). Data used for this study were collected from three sources: (1) an online student survey; (2) group journals submitted in 2011−2012 via Blackboard; and (3) staff and student meetings. Out of the three sources, most data were used from the student survey. Data from the other two sources was not available for all the modules, so caution was exercised when such data were included.

The online anonymous student survey is part of a university-wide system for module feedback that the institution requests students to complete at the end of each semester. Although the survey does not focus specifically on students' views about collaborative work, the survey was regarded as an unbiased instrument to elicit students' views on collaborative learning in relation to their overall satisfaction with the Level 2 language modules. The survey consists of seven core questions, five of which are Likert-type and two are open-ended. Each module coordinator is allowed to add up to six extra questions to the survey. This study focuses largely on a qualitative analysis of the students' responses to two open-ended questions from the five surveys completed by the students:

(1) Q6: "Identify up to three aspects of the module that most helped your learning";

(2) Q7: "Suggest up to three changes to the module that would enhance your learning".

The analysis examines comments made by students in relation to the project work. Further evidence on students' attitudes towards collaborative work and about how they managed the group work was gathered during staff-student meetings, through conversations between students and module coordinators and from the online group journals.

Satisfaction with the way the language modules were assessed was regarded as a factor significantly

linked to collaborative work, taking into consideration that the process (group journal) and product (oral presentation and audio-visual task) of the collaborative work were assessed. Therefore, quantitative analysis from Q2 "The assessments were relevant to the work of this module", a 5-point Likert-type scale question (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"), will also be undertaken. However, as the statement refers to all assessment strategies used in the module it cannot be concluded that respondents were specifically referring to assessment related to the collaborative work when they answered that question.

Results

The response rate for the surveys is displayed (see Table 1) and is in line with the response rate for other modules across the university.

Table 1

Response Rate to Institutional Student Feedback Survey

Academic year	Language modules (Level 2)	Response rate (%)
2010-2011 (semester 2)	Mod-A ($N = 55$)	38.1
	Mod-B ($N = 20$)	45
2011-2012 (semester 1)	Mod-C ($N = 93$)	46.4
2011-2012 (semester 2)	Mod-D ($N = 62$)	40.3
	Mod-E ($N = 22$)	36.3

There was significant variation in the extent to which group work and the project were identified as one of the aspects that most helped students' learning in the different modules (Q6). Collaborative work was reported as positive by 30% of the respondents from Mod-A, by 100% of respondents from Mod-B, by 13.3% of respondents in Mod-C, by 11.7% of respondents in Mod-D and by 86% of students from Mod-E. Sample extracts are:

Project and final presentation helped for consolidating material learnt. (Mod-B)

Doing the oral work in groups was a good idea—At first I wasn't so sure but in the end, you end up speaking a lot more than you would if you'd done it alone. (Mod-A)

I found the online aspect of the module and the group work outside the class helpful. (Mod-C)

Group work was very helpful. (Mod-D)

The group project was a good chance to get used to the business language and enjoyable to develop a product. (Mod-E)

Positive attitudes to collaborative work were often reflected on the group journals. Comments were made in relation to how the groups worked on strategies for team building, about the preparation for the group meetings and about decisions taken on the selection of topics that were of interest to all members of the group. Groups that worked well reflected on how beneficial the collaborative work was. Students wrote the journal in Spanish so English translations are used to illustrate some of the points made:

Participation was excellent. We all helped each other and we all learned something new. (Journal-semester 1, 2011-2012)

Group work has contributed enormously to individual work. By sharing opinions and comparing notes we have learned a lot, mainly vocabulary. (Journal-semester 1, 2011-2012)

The work we did during the meetings was very helpful to prepare us for the end of semester task. (Journal-semester 1, 2011-2012)

The meeting was very helpful because we shared all our ideas; we considered all opinions and then we reached a consensus. (Journal-semester 2, 2011-2012)

6

The key to the success of the group work was that each member did significant research and preparation prior to the meetings. (Journal-semester 2, 2011-2012)

We had done quite a lot of work before the meeting and, as a result, everybody had plenty of ideas and suggestions to work on the job advertisement. (Journal-semester 2, 2011-2012)

The only aim we had for the meeting was to divide the tasks among ourselves. (Journal-semester 2, 2011-2012)

Question 2 "The assessments were relevant to the work of this module" was the only Likert-type question in the survey relevant for this study. As explained above, it is believed that satisfaction with assessment is directly linked to the collaborative work undertaken by the students. Figure 1 illustrates that, in percentages, the degree of satisfaction with assessment reported by the respondents for each of the five modules. The percentage of students who "strongly agree" or "agree" with the assessment ranges from 100% in Mod-B and Mod-E to 52% in Mod-D, while 71.4% of respondents from Mod-A and 66.7% from Mod-C expressed that they "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement.
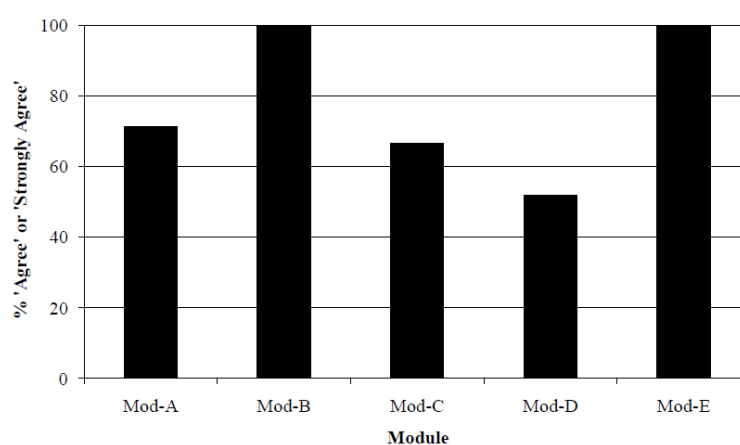

Figure 1. Relevance of assessment.

Table 2 provides the mean and standard deviation results for Q2.

Table 2

Relevance of Assessment

Language modules (Level 2)	Mean	Standard deviation
Mod-A	3.86	1.25
Mod-B	4.33	0.5
Mod-C	3.38	1.13
Mod-D	3.08	1.12
Mod-E	4.25	0.46

Collaborative learning appeared among one of the three changes to the modules suggested from the respondents (Q7). The number of comments focusing specifically on collaborative work also varied from module to module. Only 5.8% of respondents from Mod-A suggested that there should be an individual oral exam and therefore did not agree with the collaborative work or the project leading to the group oral presentation. None of the respondents from Mod-B suggested the project or group work as something they would like to change in order to enhance their learning. In Mod-C, 17.5% of respondents expressed difficulties in organising the collaborative work as well as in seeing the value of collaborative learning. 25% of

respondents from Mod-D expressed similar difficulties with the group work; the comments were varied and referred to issues about how to manage the group and about difficulties with group members. 12.5% of respondents from Mod-E suggested less focus on group work. Some quotations from the survey illustrate the students' views:

> My group had difficulty making progress on it, as we didn't know what we were meant to be doing. (Mod-C)
> Group-work project was awkward to organise for a few marks. (Mod-C)
> I felt I was doing most of the work in my group. (Mod-D)
> Abandon the group work. (Mod-D)
> If we were allowed choose our own groups, it would be much easier to organise. (Mod-D)
> Group work is frustrating for many students as we do not always get put in a group which we feel works well. (Forum 2012)

In the journal, groups that had difficulties in working together did not reflect much about their learning, they focused on describing what they did at the meeting. It appears that the objective of the students from those groups was to ensure that they had complied with the required entry in the journal rather than addressing the issues of their learning and in particular the difficulties they were experiencing while doing the group work.

Discussion and Conclusions

A large number of respondents from Mod-B and Mod-E regarded collaborative work positively when compared with respondents from Mod-C and Mod-D. This result can be explained by the ample experience on collaborative work that students taking Mod-B and Mod-E have as part of other modules in their business programme. Arguably, they had the required skills for working with others and issues related to management of the group were more easily overcome. A significant factor influencing negative views about collaborative work for students doing Mod-C and Mod-D could have been the lower linguistic ability of a large number of them. That factor could have added more pressure on those students who struggled with the module as a whole. A knock on effect has been that the more competent students in Mod-D were disillusioned with group work as they felt they could achieve better results working on their own. Overall, positive attitudes towards collaborative work were higher in 2010-2011 than in the academic year 2011-2012, if we do not include Mod-E. The lower linguistic ability of a larger number of students in the 2011-2012 cohort seems to contrast with the stronger motivational factor that characterises the 2010-2011 cohort.

As reported in the group journals, and during the staff-student forum, highly motivated groups were able to succeed in adopting the necessary strategies to work as a team (Domingo, 2008). Those groups were also successful in terms of planning, sharing responsibility and evaluating the work done (Dillenbourg, 1999). Groups with positive attitudes towards collaborative work seem to value the process of learning (Lizzio & Wilson, 2006) and the support they got from each other when working collaboratively (Wood, et al., 1976). Therefore, they worked collaboratively as described by Panitz (1996). On the other hand, the groups that struggled reported problems with the management of the group, as well as failing to report on successful planning, and the sharing of decisions about their work. In the middle of these two opposite extremes, we found a number of groups that decided to work by dividing the tasks but never collaborated fully. Those groups were only interested in achieving the end product; thus doing cooperative work but not collaborative work according to the distinction made by Panitz (1996). Self-directed learning was at the core of groups that were well managed, monitored their learning and perceived the value of learning together, reflecting the model suggested

by Garrison (1997).

There appears to be a strong correlation between higher number of respondents reporting positive attitudes to collaborative work and perceiving the relevance of assessment. This is particularly the case in Mod-B and Mod-E. On the other hand, Mod-D seems to be the one with more respondents reported negative attitudes about collaborative work and the relevance of assessment was reported as low.

From this study, it appears that students need to see the intrinsic value of learning with others. From the outset, students need to understand that collaborative work requires time, effort and self-management. They need to take responsibility for their own learning, which involves agreeing to take on different roles as part of the collaborative work, and planning and managing the group work from the start. Turning groups into effective collaborative teams may require "scaffolding" from teachers, so that they can support the students in achieving that goal. Self-directed learning that integrates self-management, self-monitoring and motivational dimensions (Garrison, 1997) would ensure not only that the groups meet or submit the required entries in the group learning journals but that the process of working together leads to greater competence in using and understanding the Spanish language.

References

Berndt, A. (2011). Collaborative learning scenarios in dp corporate's blended learning foreign language program. Proceedings of *the 4th International Conference on ICL for Language Learning*, Florence, October 20-21, 2011. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from http: //www.pixel-online.net/ICT4LL2011/conferenceproceedings.php

Daradoumis, T., & Marquès, J. M. (2000). A methodological approach to networked collaborative learning: Design and pedagogy issues. Proceedings of *the 2nd International Conference on Networked Learning*, Lancaster University, England, April 17-19, 2000.

Dillenbourg, P. (1999). What do you mean by collaborative learning? In P. Dillenbourg (Ed.), *Collaborative-learning: Cognitive and computational approaches* (pp.1-19). Oxford: Elsevier.

Domingo, J. (2008). Cooperative learning. *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social, 21*, 231-246.

European Ministers of Education. (1999). *The Bologna declaration*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.ond.vlaanderen. be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION1.pdf

Esteves, M. (2011). Learning by collaboratively writing in wikis: A strategy for the development of learners' autonomy. Proceedings of *the 4th International Conference on ICL for Language Learning*, Florence, October 20-21, 2011. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from http://www.pixel-online.net/ICT4LL2011/conferenceproceedings.php

Garrison, D. R. (1997). Self-directed learning: Towards a comprehensive model. *Adult Education Quarterly, 48*(1), 18-33.

Hernández, R. (2010). Integrating self-directed learning into the curriculum. Paper presented at *the 1st International Language Conference*, NUI Galway, December 10-11, 2010.

Knight, P. T., & Yorke, M. (2003). *Assessment, learning and employability*. Maidenhead: SRHE & Open University Press.

Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall/Cambridge.

Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *Innovations in Language Learning and Teaching, 1*(1), 14-29.

Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2006). Enhancing the effectiveness of self-managed learning groups: Understanding students' choices and concerns. *Studies in Higher Education, 31*(6), 689-703.

Ning, H. (2011). Adapting cooperative learning in tertiary ELT. *ELT Journal, 65*(1), 60-70.

Panitz, T. (1996). *A definition of collaborative vs. cooperative learning*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www.londonmet. ac.uk/deliberations/collaborative-learning/panitz-paper.cfm

Perifanou, A. M., & Costa, C. (2009). Web 2.0 scenarios in language learning sharing experiences. Proceedings of *the 2nd International Conference on ICL for Language Learning*, Florence, November 6-7, 2009. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from http:// www. pixel-online.net/ICT4LL2009/conferenceproceedings.php

Rüschoff, B. (2009). Output-oriented language learning with digital media. In M. Thomas (Ed.), *Handbook of research on Web 2.0 and second language learning* (pp. 42-59). Hershey, P. A.: IGI Global.

Silén, C., & Uhlin, L. (2008). Self-directed learning—A learning issue for students and faculty! *Teaching in Higher Education, 13*(4), 461-475.

Smith, K. A. (1996). Cooperative learning: Making "groupwork" work. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 67*, 71-82.

Smith, R. (2008). Learner autonomy. *ELT Journal, 62*(4), 395-397.

The Bologna Secretariat. (2012). *EHEA: About Bologna process*. Retrieved June 29, 2012, from http://www.ehea.info/

University College Dublin. (2010). *Strategic plan to 2014: Forming global minds*. Retrieved March 10, 2012, from http://www. ucd. ie/t4cms/plan_FINAL.pdf

Vázquez Mariño, I. (2011). Applying constructivist theories to cooperative activities in L2. *RedELE, 21, February*. Retrieved, March 12, 2012, from http://www.educacion.gob.es/redele/revistaRedEle/2011/primera.html

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of psychological processes*. Cambridge, M. A.: Harvard University Press.

Walker, L. (2001). Collaboration and the role of learner strategies in promoting second language acquisition in tandem learning partnerships. In J. Coleman, D. Fearney, D. Head, & R. Rix (Eds.), *Language-learning futures: Issues and strategies for modern languages provision in higher education* (pp. 99–114). London: CILT.

Wiersema, N. (2000). *How does collaborative learning actually work in a classroom and how do students react to it? A brief reflection*. Retrieved March 11, 2012, from http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/collab.learning/wiersema.html

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17*, 89-100.