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Group work as a creative learning process: an example from a French classroom

A B S T R A C T This article reports on a part of a larger research project which investigates the implications on French teaching and learning of South Africa's new national curriculum. The investigation involves observing current practice in the French classroom with a view to assessing whether teaching strategies need to be modified in order to conform with the outcomes-based principles of the curriculum. Research to date has shown that the most commonly used teaching technique – after the direct instruction method – is group work. However, group work is often used merely as a token gesture to the principles of the new curriculum. In this article I will describe a class in which this particular method of pedagogy is used to its full creative potential and I hope to show that as such, group work constitutes a creative learning process consistent with the participatory, experiential principles of the curriculum and represents good foreign language teaching and learning.

Key words: group work, French classroom, outcomes-based education, *National Curriculum Statement*, constructivism, games

Introduction

The classroom experience this paper describes forms part of a larger research project which investigates the implications on French teaching and learning of the Department of Education's *National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9* and *Grades 10-12* (NCS). The investigation involves observing current practice in French classrooms with a view to assessing whether teaching strategies need to be modified in order to conform with the principles of the new outcomes-based curriculum, and if so, to what extent and in what ways this might be done. Current practice still have to be tested against the principles and outcomes of the NCS in general and the Languages Learning Area in particular.

Background

The NCS

The NCS, like all curricula, is a social construct, and as such, is conceived as a response to a certain social, economic and political context. Based on the principles of

- Social Justice, a Healthy Environment, Human Rights and Inclusivity
- Outcomes-based Education
- A High Level of Skills and Knowledge for All
- Clarity and Accessibility
- Progression and Integration

(NCS-Overview, 2002: 10-13),

the curriculum, on the one hand, reflects the vision the South African government has for the nation and on the other, expresses educational assumptions about how teaching and learning should be carried out in the classroom.

The principles of the NCS can be grouped under two overarching notions, that of multiculturalism and lifelong learning. The concept of multiculturalism recognises cultural diversity and institutes a teaching and learning environment which caters for difference while preparing equally for the world of work. Banks (1995: xi) defines the aims of multicultural education as being

> to create equal educational opportunities for learners from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class and cultural groups. One of its important goals is to help all learners to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with peoples from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good.

Closely linked to this principle of multiculturalism is that of lifelong learning which stems from the recognition that knowledge is not fixed, that it is ever-changing, as is the world of work. In order to prepare learners for life, it is crucial to develop in them the ability to analyse and process knowledge while, at the same time, providing them with a basic store of knowledge. The notion of lifelong learning, with regard to the learner as well as to the teacher, is a guiding principle of the NCS; lifelong education is what will "empower people to participate effectively in all the processes of a democratic society" and to excel in all fields (*Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century: A User's Guide,* 1996: 3[1]).

1 The document *Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century: A User's Guide* is a precursor to the NCS. Listed here is the trajectory of the development of the NCS.
1995: White Paper on Education and Training. South African Qualifications Act (No 58 of 1995).
1996: National Education Policy Act (No 27 of 1996).
1996: *Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century A User's Guide*.
1997: Discussion Document: *Curriculum 2005: Specific Outcomes, Assessment Criteria, Range Statements. Grades R-9* (referred to officially as the *Statement of the National Curriculum for Grades R-9*).
1998: *Curriculum 2005: Assessment Policy Grades R-9*.
2000: *A South African Curriculum for the 21st Century. Report of the Review Committee on Curriculum 2005*.
2001: *Draft Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools)*.
2002: *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools)*.
2002: *Draft National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (Schools)*.

Both the concepts of lifelong learning and multiculturalism find expression through the choice of the outcomes-based educational model (OBE) which is the implementational tool of the NCS. William Spady, an American educationist who coined the term OBE and has had a strong influence on curriculum development in South Africa, argues that the purpose of OBE is to "[ensure] that all students are equipped with the knowledge, competence, and qualities needed to be successful after they exit the educational system" (Spady, 1994: 9). In OBE terms, equipping learners with the competences they need to face the challenges of life after school is the purpose of education. It follows that these "competences" comprise more than the mastery of a body of knowledge which will be needed to pass an exam at the end of the school experience. Competence, in terms of lifelong learning, is about thinking and doing, learning how to process knowledge, how to negotiate meaning, and develop the attitudes required to be successful in life.

The NCS has identified twelve critical and developmental outcomes which aim to achieve these types of competences:

> Learners will
> - identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking;
> - work effectively with others as members of a team, group, organisation and community;
> - organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively;
> - collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;
> - communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes;
> - use Science and Technology effectively and critically showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others;
> - demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem-solving contexts do not exist in isolation.
>
> [...] it must be the intention underlying any programme of learning to make an individual aware of the importance of:
> - reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively;
> - participating as responsible citizens in the life of local, national, and global communities;
> - being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts;
> - exploring education and career opportunities;
> - developing entrepreneurial opportunities.
>
> (NCS-Overview, 2002: 11)

These outcomes, applying to and across all the eight learning areas[2], emphasize the integration and the transfer of skills and knowledge across disciplines. Concentrating on the "how" of learning as opposed to the "what", the content of learning, these outcomes identify competences which aim to prepare learners for life.

The OBE purpose discussed above, viz. to "[ensure] that all students are equipped with the knowledge, competence, and qualities needed to be successful after they exit the educational

2 The NCS is made of up eight Learning Areas: Languages, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Arts and Culture, Life Orientation, Economic and Management Sciences, and, Technology. Each learning area comprises a statement which defines the learning area and a list of outcomes specific to that learning area.

system" (Spady, 1994: 9), is based on three key OBE assumptions, all centered on the concept of success for *all* learners. The first basic premise is that "[A]ll students can learn and succeed, but not on the same day in the same way" (1994: 9)[3]. Spady goes on to say that learning rates and learning styles need to be taken into consideration in the classroom if successful learning is to take place. Thus, OBE puts the learner at the centre of the instructional process and the NCS accordingly prescribes that teaching and learning be learner-centered, with the teacher in the role of mediator, and with a curriculum which "leave(s) considerable room for creativity and innovation on the part of teachers in interpreting what and how to teach" (NCS-Overview, 2002: 12).

However, notwithstanding this flexible, learner-centered approach which supports diversity, an OBE system is built around a clearly defined framework of outcomes. Outcomes describe what the learner should be able to *do* at the end of a learning experience:

> [...] outcomes are actions and performances that embody and reflect learner competence in using content, information, ideas, and tools successfully. (Spady, 1994: 2)

The NCS identifies two distinct types of outcomes, the cross-curricular outcomes listed above which refer to generic skills and apply to all learning areas, and learning area outcomes. Each of the eight learning areas of the NCS sets down a varying number of exit outcomes which are specific to the discipline. These learning area outcomes are rooted in what constitutes the characteristics of the particular discipline; they describe what learners ought to be able to do at the end of a learning experience in that particular learning area. French falls under the Languages learning area and the outcomes refer specifically to the skills of communication and to the role of language:

> Learning Outcome 1: Listening
> The learner will be able to listen for information and enjoyment, and respond appropriately and critically in a wide range of situations.
>
> Learning Outcome 2: Speaking
> The learner will be able to communicate confidently and effectively in spoken language in a wide range of situations.
>
> Learning Outcome 3: Reading and Viewing
> The learner will be able to read and view for information and enjoyment, and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts.
>
> Learning Outcome 4: Writing
> The learner will be able to write different kinds of factual and imaginative texts for a wide range of purposes.
>
> Learning Outcome 5: Thinking and Reasoning
> The learner will be able to use language to think and reason, as well as to access, process and use information for learning.
>
> Learning Outcome 6: Language Structure and Use
> The learner will know and be able to use the sounds, words and grammar of the language to create and interpret texts. (NCS-Languages, 2002: 6-7)

3 The other two key assumptions which are not discussed here are: "Successful learning promotes even more successful learning" and "Schools control the conditions that directly affect successful school learning" (Spady, 1994: 9).

Activity-based learning

This emphasis on learning and teaching leading to demonstrable actions or performances dictates that pedagogical practices are activity-based. Learners must be able to apply knowledge and skills in a tangible manner. Outcomes are a demonstration that learning has been achieved and learning in OBE terms is doing. Experiential learning is therefore a basic tenet of the OBE paradigm and the NCS.

Experiential, learner-centered and process-driven and these three principles of the outcomes-based NCS are firmly grounded in the learning theories of recent decades, and in particular, in the constructivist approach. The fundamental premise of a constructivist approach is that cognition is the result of "mental construction". In other words, learners learn by fitting new information together with what they already know. Constructivism also believes that learning is socially mitigated, that it is affected by the learning context as well as by the learners' beliefs and attitudes. The main underlying assumption of constructivism is

> that individuals are actively involved right from birth in constructing personal meaning, that is their own personal understanding, learning from their experiences. In other words, everyone makes their own sense of the world and the experiences that surround them. (Williams and Burden, 1997: 21)

This conceptualisation of how one learns brings the learner into central focus and privileges the process of learning alongside the content. If each individual constructs his or her own reality and therefore learns different things in different ways even when provided with what seems to be very similar learning experiences, learning and teaching strategies need to be learner-centered and stress the process of knowing over the accumulation of facts or the development of skills if successful learning is to take place.

It is against this backdrop of theories of learning, of the principles of the NCS, and of the cross-curricular and Languages learning area outcomes that this study will test group work in the French classroom.

Observations

In the research carried out to date, I have observed approximately fifty French classes in the Kwa-Zulu Natal area and have noted that the most commonly used teaching technique – after the conventional direct instruction method which still predominates – is group work. I have learnt through questionnaires and interviews with teachers that group work is commonly considered as being a particularly OBE-friendly strategy, consequently, attempts are made to incorporate this technique into classroom practice. However, much of the group work I have observed is often merely a token gesture to the participatory, experiential principles of the NCS and does not in actual fact achieve any particular outcome apart from desultory chatting. On the other hand, I have also seen group work used in very valuable ways and in this paper, I will describe a teaching unit in which this particular pedagogy is used to its full creative potential and thus, is likely to lead to lifelong learning. I hope to show that group work, as it is practised in the example, constitutes a creative learning process which, as such, is consistent with the outcomes-based principles of the national curriculum and represents, simply, good foreign language teaching and learning.

A creative learning process

A creative learning process is the antithesis of the traditional teacher-centred, content-driven approaches in which learners passively receive knowledge which they are required to repeat at a later stage for evaluation purposes. Learners engaged in creative learning are active, making meaning, constructing and processing knowledge. Learning involves a process of ongoing transformation, of infinite "becoming". This infinite "becoming", or transformation, occurs at the confluence of activated resources within learners and those resources provided by the classroom situation. The teacher facilitates learning by giving learners access to the tools they need to engage in the "becoming" process: an awareness of the resources they already have, new information, and a situation or context which allows, challenges and motivates learners to learn experientially, through participation. Building on *their* knowledge and skills, making sense of what *they* are learning by doing, behaving and reflecting, a "transformation" takes place and new knowledge and a new "being" comes into existence. A process which is based on transformation "[moves] beyond stability to tap the *creative* powers inherent in instability (my emphasis) (Doll, 1993: 3). Creative learning is lifelong learning going beyond the immediate recall needs of (thereafter quickly forgotten) facts for normative assessment tests.

This notion of a creative learning process stems from constructivist learning theory: knowledge is not an objective construct which exists "out there" (Malcolm, 1999: 84). What a person knows, is not just received passively but is actively constructed by that person and integrated into the person's existing "body of knowledge", which through the incorporation of new knowledge, shifts and re-coheres in response to the new. Hence, what we know is always in a process of "becoming", and, thus, we as beings are as a consequence also always in a process of becoming. Creative learning precludes a controlled system focussing on input and predetermined output and supposes rather the achievement of outcomes through a complex, unpredictable arrangement which allows learners to create and choose rather than to order and follow.

In such a paradigm, the relationship between the teacher and a group of learners, and amongst the learners themselves, is different from that of the modernist, traditional transmission approach which is premised on the teacher as the knowledge-bearer and the learner as an empty vessel or a *tabula rasa* whose mind has to be filled or written on, respectively. In the looser, more exploratory, postmodern-like, interactive, experiential structure, learners and teachers are seen as a group of people interacting together to explore and discover through the sharing of their group diversity and thus learn. Curriculum content is interpreted and created through the interaction of teacher and learner, learner and teacher, learner and learner, with each individual learner being at the centre of the learning process. Learner-centredness is at the heart of a creative approach to learning.

A learner-centred teaching and learning environment has, since the inception of the NCS, been a fundamental principle of National Education policy.

> Curriculum development, especially the development of learning programmes and materials, should put learners first, recognising and building on their knowledge and values and lifestyles experience, as well as responding to their needs. (*Curriculum 2005: Lifelong Learning for the 21st Century: A User's Guide*, 1996: 5)

In its commitment to outcomes-based education, defined simply as a learner-centred process which is activity-based and "designed to promote problem-solving and critical thinking" (NCS-Overview, 2001: 4), the NCS continues to give considerable emphasis to constructivist, creative approaches to learning.

Foreign language acquisition

In the context of the foreign language classroom, a creative pedagogy is essential for effective language acquisition to take place; the particular characteristics of the discipline of foreign-language learning require it. Firstly, in foreign language teaching and learning, the end is also the means: in other words, to learn to speak French, you need to speak in French; to learn how to use the subjunctive in speech, you need to use the subjunctive in speech. Learning has, therefore, to be experiential, with the learner actively participating in the creation of meaning. Secondly, although a language is made up of a body of knowledge such as grammatical or syntactical rules and structures, lexical items, etc., which need to be understood and assimilated, learners themselves provide a certain amount of content within a particular context. In foreign language acquisition, input from learners is paramount as they have to bring to bear on their communication what it is that they personally want to say and how they want to say it. Thirdly, speaking a language entails taking the *savoir-faire*, (know-how of language), and using it to make and negotiate meaning, the *vouloir-dire*, (intended meaning: what the speaker wants to say is not always understood in this way by the listener/receiver). Furthermore, speaking a foreign language[4] involves a *savoir-être* (social know-how, or pragmatics), which is usually acquired by first language speakers by osmosis from their cultural and linguistic community, but which has to be learned by foreign language learners who frequently have no natural foreign cultural and linguistic community on which to draw, and whose practices act as input to the learner.

Reagan & Osborn (2002: 64) argue that it is this latter aspect of foreign language learning which makes it distinct from any other discipline. "Languages are unlike any other subject taught in a classroom in that they involve the acquisistion of skills and behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another community" (Gardner, 1985, cited in Reagan & Osborn, 2002: 64). Communicating successfully in a foreign language entails expressing a culture, a world view which might be distinct from that of the learner's. To speak French appropriately requires that learners assimilate and/or identify with French behaviour and establish a personal profile which functions appropriately in French communication events. Establishing such an identity in the target language requires the speaker to undergo a process of transformation in which a new culturally competent identity comes into being, or, is "created".

Foreign language acquisition, therefore, is the result of a fusion between the learner and that to-be-learned; the two cannot be separated. Foreign language acquisition entails the modification and the creation of knowledge, and also requires the development of new skills forged within the learner through contact with the raw material of the language: input from the (albeit artificial) classroom, teachers, and peers. Pedagogical practice needs to take these characteristics into account for learning to be effective. The teaching and learning process must allow for the

4 This may also be true of varieties of, for example, English in which the cultural differences of Australia, America, South Africa, and Britain need to be taken into account if one is to express oneself appropriately in the language. This also holds for the French spoken in Paris as opposed to that of the provinces.

creation of knowledge and skills, and needs to engage learners as active participants rather than as mere observers. Foreign-language pedagogy must put learners in a situation that demands, and permits, personal input and creative output.

Group work

There is no one single teaching strategy which is best suited to foreign language acquisition: learning and teaching are complex activities requiring multiple, flexible approaches, and the nature of the teacher and the needs of the learner are as varied as the approaches available. However, the strategies and principles of collaborative or co-operative group work make group work a particularly effective technique to bring about creative foreign language teaching and learning. The fundamental characteristics of group work are that it engages learners actively in learning, teaching them to be less reliant on the teacher and more reliant on their own ability both as individuals and as members of a group, to think, and to seek information from other sources. Group work relies heavily on input from learners, both as individuals and as members of a group, and on their recognition of co-team members as a potential resource. In group work the teacher passes control for some parts of the lesson over to learners who, in the group work situation, are challenged to access, gather and process information. They are also challenged to negotiate the learning space, arrange and process information with their group members. Most importantly, in the foreign language classroom context where communication is the overarching outcome, group work is particularly apt as it recreates the social context of communication: learners are put into a personal relationship situation in which interaction and co-operation promotes learning.

In an effort to identify what helps to make group work successful as an organisational and pedagogical strategy which facilitates learning, Killen (2000: 73), lists the following criteria:

A clear focus on learning
Preparation of (and by) the learners
A clear set of guidelines for learners
Management of the learning environment
Direction, but not intrusion, by the teacher
Willing participation by all learners
Monitoring and feedback by the teacher
Careful time management by the teacher and the learners
A logical conclusion.

In the teaching unit I have chosen as an example, group work is used successfully and to particularly good effect. Using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in a process in which learners are called upon to actively construct knowledge in a personal manner, effective foreign language acquisition takes place. However, it must be noted that because this is a beginner class, the learners' creative output in French is limited. *Vouloir-dire* (intended meaning) is minimal and there is no actualisation at this stage of *savoir-être* (social know-how). The learning process involves no more than the assimilation, use and creative reconstruction of *savoir-faire* (know-how of language). The learning situation is also tightly structured and the linguistic elements at the learners' disposal are restricted. However, the success of the learning lies in the fact that using group work as the teaching strategy and by creating a

conducive learning space or context, learners are allowed and are required to make the new knowledge their own, by using it in a manner which is meaningful to them. In this way, group work involves learners in a process of creative learning.

Example of group work in a French classroom

The teaching unit which I observed is made up of two lessons, one 30-minute lesson and one 60-minute lesson which are part of a continuum. The learning outcome is that "[t]he learner will know and be able to use the sounds, words and grammar of the language to create and interpret texts" (NCS-Languages, 2002: 29). The twelve learners in the group were in Grade 8 and had had approximately 40-50 hours of instruction in French; language acquisition was therefore at an elementary level. The first 30-minute lesson involved understanding the conjugation pattern in the present indicative of the *–er* group of verbs and then conjugating a number of these verbs with subject pronouns. The second 60-minute lesson involved using these same *–er* verbs, with nouns, prepositions and adverbs to create simple sentences. Both of these lessons comprised two parts: the presentation and explanation of new information by the teacher using mainly direct instruction but with significant participation of the class through activities, and the appropriation and use of this new information in the context of group work.

The first lesson began with the teacher telling learners what they were going to do: they were going to learn how to conjugate the fifteen or so verbs they had learnt as lexical items in a previous lesson. In order to aid memorisation[5] and avoid the use of English equivalents these verbs had been previously learnt in conjunction with gestures which had all been chosen by the learners. *Chercher* (to look for), was symbolically represented by placing the hand above the eyes, *écouter* (to listen), by cupping the hand behind the ear, *jouer* (to play), by a motion of the hands and arms indicating the revolving of a skipping-rope over the head. For *adorer* (to love or adore), learners had chosen a gesture indicating an object or creature being held up by the scruff of its neck and being gently slapped on the behind. This particular gesture was a source of great merriment each time it was used and evidently referred to a situation which was meaningful to the class. Through this creation of gestures, the learners' own knowledge, and interpretation of reality, were brought together in the learners' work in the classroom. Some of the signs were stereotypical and *clichéd* (*chercher* and *écouter*, for example), others were specific to the learners' world experience as individuals or as a group (*adorer*). The use of gestures to represent meaning symbolically is a distinguishing feature of the teaching unit and recurs at different stages of the learning and teaching process. The use of gestures means that meaning is not just known, but understood and therefore can be meaningfully used.

After the learners had practised the verbs by calling them out in unision accompanied by the gestures symbolising their meaning, the teacher chose one of the verbs and conjugated it orally. The teacher, observing the rule regarding the order in which the four language learning skills are best learnt, initially presented only the conjugations which are homophonous: for example, for the verb *chercher, je cherche, tu cherches, il cherche, elle cherche, ils cherchent, elles cherchent*. Learners repeated after the teacher. After this aural/oral presentation, the teacher wrote the conjugated verbs on the board, while stressing the pronunciation and calling attention

5 As with figures, bonds and multiplication, which are the elements on which mathematics and its extended processes are based, letters and lexical items are the basic elements upon which we make and negotiate meaning. These elements will indubitably have to be memorised.

to the different spellings. The teacher then called out the conjugation of the *nous* and *vous* forms, which sound different to all the others: *nous cherchons, vous cherchez*. These were repeated in unision by the class and then the teacher wrote them on the board, drawing attention to the spelling.

The teacher then revised the personal pronouns *je, tu, il, elle*, etc. which had also been previously learnt using gestures. The fingers, used in a counting motion, figuratively represented the eight subject pronouns: the thumb as one representing the first person singular *je*, the index finger as two representing the second person singular *tu*, the middle finger the third person *il*, etc. This whole-class expository teaching session took approximately ten minutes, that is, one third of the lesson.

In the second part of the session, which took up the remaining twenty minutes of lesson time, learners played a game which entailed group work. The game involved two groups whose configuration had been decided upon in a previous lesson. Group one chose a verb from the fifteen or so learnt previously and conjugated it, from memory, with a pronoun of their choice (for example *chercher*, with *ils* = *ils cherchent*). The phrase was then written on a sheet of paper, shown to the teacher who checked whether it was correct. One person in the group was then elected to make the appropriate gestures which would express the meaning of the verb chosen and the personal pronoun chosen. Group two collectively deciphered the gestures and one person was elected to write the deciphered phrase on the board. Roles were then reversed and the game continued until all the subject pronouns had been used with a selection of the *–er* verbs. Points were given for the correct interpretation and spelling and at the end of the session scores were tallied and the winning group was announced[6].

What could have been a dull, expository lesson on the conjugation of verbs with learners passively listening to the teacher then completing drill exercises, was turned into an exuberant game with every learner participating animatedly, actively engaging with the structures which they were required to construct, deconstruct and then reconstruct using different mediums of expression. Learners were "manipulating" language in an interactive way; they were required to work cooperatively within the individual groups and to work interactively in a competitive manner between groups. Furthermore, learners had control over their learning, they themselves decided on the rules of the game and on the *modus operandi*. There was much discussion, difference of opinion and negotiation with the teacher intervening only to suggest a vote be taken when it was clear consensus was not being reached.

The second 60-minute lesson built on the first with previous learning being reinforced and then extended with the introduction of new foundational knowledge. The format of the learning was the same as the previous one: direct instruction with learner participation, followed by group work. The first step of this session was the revision of the conjugations learnt the previous day, then association with the subject pronouns; the second, was to tell the learners what they were going to do: they were going to create sentences with the verbs and pronouns they had learnt and incorporate prepositions, nouns and adverbs of frequency. The interactive nature of the teacher's style was evident when a learner interjected at that point to say: "We've never done

6 Although this was not the case in this class, the final scores could have been kept as a group mark and used for assessment purposes.

those". The teacher picked up on the *never* and began to teach adverbs, again using gestures to represent meaning. With the open hand held rigidly in a horizontal position in front of the chest with the palm facing inward, the teacher asked the class which finger was the most important. The class answered in chorus, "The thumb". "And the least important? the finger you never need to use?" asked the teacher. "The little finger", answered the class. The first symbolises *toujours* (always) the latter, *jamais* (never), the index finger *souvent* (often), the middle finger *quelquefois* (sometimes), the ring finger *rarement* (sometimes). Pronunciation was practised and the new lexical items were memorised by class repetition in unison aided by the teacher's writing of the adverbs on the board. This part of the lesson took approximately fifteen minutes.

The teacher then invited the class to choose French nouns they knew that could be used in sentences. These nouns, like the verbs, pronouns and prepositions, had been learnt previously also accompanied by gestures to represent meaning visually. Hence, *la maison* (house or home), was represented by a finger drawing in the air of a child's design of a house, *la plage* (beach), by the hands placed behind the head in a sign of relaxation, *la piscine* (swimming pool), by the breast-stroke action, *le café* (café), by the gesture symbolising the holding of an imaginary cup, with little finger in the air and bringing the cup to one's lips. The latter symbol was an obvious reference to an in-house joke, as was the sign for the verb *adorer* mentioned above, as the gesture was accompanied by laughter each time it was used. Learners then came up individually to write the nouns with the relevant articles on the board. Learners then revised the nouns by calling them out aloud with the accompanying gesture: thus, listening, speaking, writing and viewing were being practised in this part of the lesson.

The teacher then consolidated understanding of the prepositions d*ans, sur, sous, devant, derrière* (in/inside, on, under, in front of, behind), which had also been previously learnt, again with the help of gestures. This part of the lesson which entailed consolidation of previous learning took approximately seven minutes.

The learners having acquired the language content which was necessary for the making of meaning in sentences, were then divided into groups. As in the previous lesson, group work involved playing a game in which two teams competed against each other and scores were kept. Group one created a sentence, wrote it out, had it checked by the teacher, then mimed it to the other group. Group two collectively decided on the transcription, and the chosen scribe wrote it up on the board. The learning experience was based on the principle of going from the known to the unknown: by building on and building up knowledge already acquired, learners created sentences. The task was demanding in that learners needed to source the different pieces of the puzzle from memory. They were also challenged as word order has not been discussed, nor had the possible use of verbs intransitively (*Quelquefois j'aime jouer dans la maison* vs *Je joue quelquefois dans la maison*, Sometimes I like to play inside the house vs I sometimes play inside the house). Thus, learners had the opportunity to ask themselves questions, to detect problems, to be reflective. Answers to questions and solutions to problems had to be found through discussion with other members of the group or by calling on the teacher for help. Moreover, learners had to associate the lexical items with the specific gesture – or conversely, interpret the gestures, articulating them and writing them, thereby consolidating and confirming their assimilation of functionality of the items. This latter part of the lesson took approximately

thirty-five minutes, it was clear that a lot of new learning, not planned by the teacher, was being done. The teacher circulated from group to group and explained grammatical or syntactical structures.

Analysis of the empirical event

The described learning experience involved taking separate elements of French language (verbs, pronouns, prepositions, etc.) and combining them to construct sentences. In essence, this exercise is little different from the type of structural exercise found in most language manuals. In the following example from *Café Crème 2, Méthode de Français Cahier d'exercices* (1998: 85), elements of language are given in separate lists and learners are asked to take an element from each list in order to create five different sentences.

À partir du tableau, faites cinq phrases. Choisissez les éléments qu'il vous faut

	je			cependant	le public	
Bien que	vous	répondre	correctement			ne pas suivre.
	M. Morice	expliquer	clairement	mais	certains	

~ Bien que vous expliquiez clairement, certains ne suivent pas.

The desired outcome is ostensibly the same as the one desired in the lessons described above. My contention is, however, that in the activities discussed above, learning is more effective for two main reasons: learners participate creatively in the learning process; and learning is a collaborative effort. With regard to the participatory aspect of the learning experience, learners provide input on three levels:

1. They have a say in the management of the learning environment (they decide on the composition of groups and on the rules of the game), they have control over how they proceed, and are responsible for the structure within which sentences are created.
2. They create some of the strategies of learning. The gesticulatory language is a mnemonic device which aids memorisation, and kinaestheically conveys meaning thus avoiding translation into the mother tongue. It turns learning into a game which is motivating and fun. However, more importantly, the expression of meaning by gestures chosen by the learners is direct proof of meaning having been made and negotiated.
3. Learners are involved in the learning process, they are not passive recipients of content. The combination of traditional learning techniques – memorisation, choral repetition, correction of pronunciation and spelling – along with group work, which is an open-ended learning experience, is particularly successful. Too often it is thought that in the outcomes-based classroom 'traditional' teaching techniques must be banished. In language learning, these are essential, but just as essential, is to put learners in a situation where they can appropriate the learning, exploit it actively, in a real-life context in which they are motivated to make knowledge their own so that it can be used in future.

As for the collaborative feature of the learning experience, it is clear that group work should by definition be a collaborative exercise. Members of the group work together to achieve a common goal, they interact with one another and draw on one another's knowledge and skills. In this example this basic characteristic of group work is enhanced: learners are required to construct sentences from elements which have been memorised, there is no written support, they depend entirely on each others' knowledge of the lexical items, their meaning and spelling and of the rules of conjugation and sentence structure and this collaborative construction of knowledge is all the more creative. Thus, this collaborative, co-operative construction of knowledge is all the more creative.

Conclusion

During the above sessions, learning was a creative process. The defining features of this learning situation are echoed in the Williams and Burden nomenclature (cited by Reagan & Osborn, 2000: 67) of the characteristics of a constructivist approach to foreign language teaching and learning:

> Learners learn what is meaningful to them.
> Learners learn better if they feel in control of what they are learning.
> Learning is closely linked to how people feel about themselves.
> Learning takes place in a social context through interaction with other people.
> There is a significant role of the teacher as mediator in the language classroom.
> Learning is influenced by the situation in which it occurs.

It was clear to me, the observer, that learners in this classroom situation were inspired and stimulated by the exercise. The fact that groups were in competition with each other motivated learners to complete tasks efficiently and encouraged their learning. In this learning environment they had to rely on themselves and each other to recall information and use it creatively to construct knowledge in a subjective, personal manner. When they had created their sentence, mimed it and were waiting for the other group to interpret their gestures, they spontaneously, in pairs or alone, went over the vocabulary to be learned, their hands making gestures which indicated that their were active and that learning was taking place.

In the learning activities I have described, all Killen's criteria for successful group work (quoted above) were met. The learning activities were an excellent example of a creative learning process in a foreign language classroom in which learners' competency is at an elementary level. Learners took a finite set of options, accorded meaning to them and then accessed skills to use them to negotiate, create and interpret meaning. In creative group work such as described in the example, learners learn because they are doing in a meaningful way, and in a situation over which they have control. This is the baseline of the creative learning process. It is also consistent with the outcomes-based principles of the NCS: the activities were learner-centered and activity-based with the process of learning holding a position of equal privilege as the content of learning. Many of the cross-curricular outcomes quoted in the introduction to this article were met: learners identifed and solved problems, made decisions using critical and creative thinking; worked with others as members of a group, organised and managed themselves and their activities; collected, analysed, organised and critically evaluated information; and, communicated using visual, symbolic and language skills. The teacher in the example was a good facilitator.

As the transmitter of knowledge in the first part of the lessons, the teacher became a guide and mentor, circulating from group to group, answering questions, asking questions, correcting and clarifying, facilitating the achievement of the outcomes of the Languages learning area (see above). Learners listened, spoke, viewed and wrote in French, reflected on the structure and use of language. Through these activities, along with participation and collaboration, learning took place, with knowledge and skills developing, advanced integrated knowledge coming into being as part of an organic, creative process.

What could have been a dry memorisation exercise involving interaction only between a mute learner and a list of words and rules under the authoritarian control of a didactic and dogmatic teacher, was instead turned into a communicative, inter-personal game with creative interaction in French. Learners were *enabled* to learn effectively. They interacted with one another and the teacher. Drawing on the basic knowledge which had been provided by the teacher, they engaged with that knowledge, reconstructing it, making it their own. The learning brought meaning and functionality to the components of the language. This enhanced the learners' understanding and their assimilation of the new content. Also, prior learning was activated, helping learners to reconstruct and integrate, but in context, not in isolation, their understanding of the new learning matter. Most importantly, learners were motivated to learn because the situation was meaningful to them, was seen to be functional, and last, but not least, fun.

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