ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and recorded experiences of a high school French teacher and her twenty-three students taking Level I French every day for forty-two minutes in a large, suburban public high school of approximately 2800 students. The Level I French class for this study was heterogeneous across age, grade, ability, and experience levels. The study examines the role of cooperative learning in this heterogeneous environment, and its effect upon student scaffolding and peers as both experts and novices within their cooperative learning groups. The author defines the zone of proximal development and student scaffolding as they relate specifically to second language acquisition, and documents the use of cooperative learning activities and grouping strategies over the course of the three-month study. The study identifies the positive effects of cooperative learning on language acquisition, student scaffolding, and group dynamics. Specifically, it reveals positive academic results in the areas of listening and reading, and emerging skills for many students in writing and speaking. The study identifies the ways in which students were able to scaffold each other's learning, and areas where they needed additional support from the teacher. The study suggests that differences in age, grade, and ability levels do affect group dynamics. Finally, it suggests modifications to the study, including more group-building exercises at the beginning of the school year and before each cooperative group change, tightly structured cooperative group
activities, and more teacher support both before and during the cooperative group assignments.