Generating Absorption in English as a Foreign Language Assessment through Directed Motivational Current Project Work

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A B S T R A C T

Intensive project work framed within a directed motivational current theory can transform an assessment into an engaging learning opportunity. Accordingly, a project built around the "The BIG Issue" framework variant was implemented in an English as a foreign language classroom to explore the purposeful generation of group-directed motivational current experiences. The study additionally examined the parameters that facilitated total absorption in the project. To reach these aims, learner diaries were used to collect qualitative data from five students working in small groups. A thematic analysis of the data revealed that the participants experienced purposefully generated group-directed motivational currents. They also indicated that certain features related to well-designed projects, such as authenticity and congruence, engendered an exceptional productivity that helped informants sustain their heightened, motivational drive until they achieved their project work goals. As a result, learners' test taking anxiety was maintained at an optimal level, which in turn fostered complete engagement in project work. The findings of the study not only provide empirical validity for the purposeful facilitation of group-directed motivational current experiences, but also suggest that language teachers can use these experiences as an alternative in second language assessment to increase learners' engagement and productivity.

Keywords: absorption/engagement; assessment; group-directed motivational currents; project; the big Issue framework

A R T I C L E   H I S T O R Y

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Introduction

In many francophone countries, such as Mali, a country in West Africa, assessment is a source of anxiety and frustration. For example, summative exams (e.g., baccalaureate, an exam done at the end of 12 years of education) are usually organized to provide learners with a rank and a score that are used as the sole criteria for administrative decisions. According to Koné (2020), summative exams discriminate against students who are not competitive or high-achieving learners. Besides, teachers may not have the opportunity to provide learners with quality feedback that is conducive to successful English learning. For example, most exam questions are decontextualized traditional assessment activities such as multiple-choice and true or false questions, matching, and translation from one language to another. These activities only require learners to recall what they have learnt in previous classes instead of using the language to achieve something authentic. Another issue generated by decontextualized assessment is its lack of connection with the specific needs of learners. Additionally, it may be difficult for students to engage in activities that do not integrate their learning goals. In light of the many barriers to engagement in the Malian EFL context, it is necessary to conduct a classroom intervention study using intensive project work, organized around one or a combination of Dörnyei et al.'s (2016) project framework variants, as an assessment instrument to investigate the motivational surges of English learners and the conditions that sustain them.

Project Work and its Positive Impact on Second Language Learning

Project work provides learners with skills that enable them to use the target language to solve real-life problems (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Guo et al., 2020; Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Additionally, it promotes students' engagement, autonomy, and the use of more complex knowledge when completing the project's various tasks. The high-level engagement generated by intensive project work is reflected in a study by Muir (2016), which found that students learning business English in Sweden were focused on a fund-raising project because it not only gave them opportunities to use their English in real-life situations, but also to achieve a valued long-term learning goal. In fact, these groups of learners were autonomous, which increased their engagement in the project and helped them function outside the classroom to achieve their goals. Consistent with Muir's results showing the association between intensive project work and increased learner motivation levels, Almulla's (2020) study also indicated that project work has the potential to engage students in their own learning. A well-designed project, such as one that takes into account the specific needs of learners, may motivate them to persist in accomplishing project subgoals until they reach their final objectives. Persisting in completing actions at all costs generates engagement, which in turn facilitates the achievement of long-term learning goals (Hiver et al., 2021).

Other aspects of project work that positively influence learners' motivation are the recurring negotiations that take place during group development. For example, a longitudinal study by Kobayashi (2003) found a relationship between project work and accuracy (i.e., language form and meaning), although the main goal of the project was speaking fluency. Negotiations that occur during small group work allow a language learner to have access to knowledge that is beyond their control through their peers in the group, classroom teacher, or library research. Group cohesion, another condition for successful project work, can stimulate exceptional productivity and engagement. These positive influences are supported by a study by Chang (2010), which found that learners whose groups were cohesive and had positive group norms achieved at a higher level compared with students whose groups were not cohesive. Group cohesion can also increase learners' autonomy, and thus motivate them to give more attention to their project. Furthermore, Dörnyei et al. (2016) and Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019) suggest that autonomy is the key to success in group project work because it allows learners to function

outside the classroom and to make their own decisions, such as selecting a topic or deciding on a meeting time.

Regarding the use of projects in second language (L2) assessment, previous studies have examined how they facilitate goal setting. For instance, Fook and Sidhu (2010) conducted a qualitative study to explore the impact that collaborative projects, seminar papers, and portfolios used as assessment instruments had on the motivation levels of 20 graduate students. The authors used document analysis and observation to analyze the data. Their findings indicated that these tools encouraged the participants to reflect on their learning processes, to evaluate teaching outcomes, and to set new goals for their own learning.

A study by Koné (2015) with 21 English as a second language learners (ESL) also revealed that project work motivates learners to analyze their strengths and weaknesses and to set new goals for their long-term learning. Additionally, project work can establish social equity and minimize what Darling-Hammond (1994) called educational inequality. Darling-Hammond argued that traditional norm-referenced scores that are only used for sorting purposes may not give equal opportunities to learners. On the other hand, project work enables a teacher to evaluate not only the final outcome of an assessment, but also the processes involved in its completion. Therefore, the outcomes of the assessment serve to enhance the process of teaching and learning, and thus give an opportunity to those learners who are not high-achievers to reach the goals set for the project with their group. Additionally, quality feedback given by the teacher during project work can help these low achievers improve their weaknesses before reaching the final stage of their project work.

In summary, project work motivates language learners to practice positive learning behaviors, that is, being responsible, setting goals at each step of their learning, and improving their performance so that they can successfully achieve their learning goals. Although previous studies have focused on the roles played by project work in L2 learning, they have not specifically examined the purposeful generation of motivational surges with intensive project work used as an assessment tool, nor have they addressed the conditions that stimulate the occurrence of shared, sustained flow or group-directed motivational current (DMC) experiences during the process of assessment. The present study is therefore an attempt to fill this empirical gap by exploring the purposeful facilitation of group-DMC experiences with intensive project work. It also scrutinizes the situations that sustain them, and it further investigates whether it is possible to use group-directed motivational currents as an alternative in L2 assessment. As the research related to DMC theory is still in its infancy, I present an overview of the concept before presenting the research questions.

Review of Literature

Directed Motivational Currents/Sustained Shared Flow

Dörnyei et al. (2014) and Muir and Dörnyei (2013) introduced directed motivational current theory to explain language learners' motivational surges. The concept of shared, sustained flow (SSF) was first used by Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019), who state that the two terms are interchangeable. DMCs/SSF are exceptional motivational phenomena that can be experienced by an individual learner or a group of students determined to achieve a significant learning goal such as speaking a foreign language fluently (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013; Muir & Gümüş, 2020; Sorayyaee et al., 2022). They are characterized by generating parameters, goal/vision orientedness, a salient facilitative structure, and positive emotionality (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Dörnyei et al., 2015). These features have been corroborated by recent studies (Henry et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2016a; Muir, 2016; Safdari & Maftoon, 2017; Zarrinabadi &

Tavakoli, 2017), which have lent some validity to the DMC theory. Other characteristics include total absorption/engagement and endurance (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Henry, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016b; 2020; Muir et al., 2020).

The notion of absorption/engagement on which I focus in the study is a core feature of DMC experiences. Additionally, both terms are used interchangeably. In fact, "DMCs and flow experiences both involve heightened awareness and complete absorption" (Henry, 2019, p. 140). Total absorption enables persons experiencing DMCs to persist in achieving their long-term goals effortlessly. Hiver et al. (2021) argued that an "engaged learner is actively involved in and committed to their own learning" (p. 2). In other words, they devote considerable effort, attention, and time to their learning (Dewaele & Li, 2021). The behaviors of participants in Henry et al. (2015) illustrated the exceptional effort investment tied to DMCs. For example, participants persisted in performing tasks that were not always enjoyable, such as staying at school after regular courses to study despite fatigue. These students were focused on achieving their strongly-desired goals at all costs.

Individual DMCs/SSF

Individual DMCs/SSF are motivational phenomena that can be found worldwide, in all teaching and learning contexts (Muir, 2016). Each individual learner regardless of race and gender can experience DMCs (Muir, 2016). Based on the results of the study by Ibrahim (2017), an individual DMC can be stimulated by either a positive or a negative event, such as obtaining a scholarship or failing a job interview conducted in a foreign language. There is also a special increase in the level of motivation of persons experiencing DMCs/SSF. When the currents wane, they may have a feeling of enjoyment or frustration. For example, some participants in Henry et al. (2015) were frustrated at the end of their DMC experiences although they had clear language learning goals. Moreover, individuals who experienced DMCs/SSF wanted to relive their unique motivational experiences (Henry et al., 2015). Their strong desire to bring DMC experiences to life may facilitate their application in the classroom as it can be used to establish new learning habits.

Group-DMCs/SSF

A group-DMC can be described as intensive group project work whose completion motivates a group of students to strive for a collective goal that is significant for each of them (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Ibrahim, 2016; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Muir, 2016). A group-DMC/SSF is characterized by a sequence of intense motivational peaks and productivity that goes beyond expectations. A study by Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019) found that they can be sustained by the following conditions: formation of a group identity, attaching a personal value, and partial autonomy. Other situations that can stimulate the occurrence of group motivational flows include positive group work dynamics such as cohesive groups with positive group norms, an inspiring group leader, a positive classroom atmosphere, and a topic that raises curiosity and passion (Dörnyei et al., 2016). A group-DMC needs more triggering situations so that a successful launch can be guaranteed. By way of illustration, Table 1 shows some differences between individual and group motivational currents based on the studies by Ibrahim (2016a), Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019), and Muir (2016).

Table 1
Differences between Individual and Group-DMCs

Individual DMCs	Group-DMCs
The start of individual currents can sometimes be immediate and intense	The flight of group currents may sometimes take a longer time to operate
The trigger can be a positive or negative event	Intensive project work completed in small groups can be the trigger
The trigger and the goal are separate	The trigger and the goal are merged
Clear goals	Clear project goals with tangible outcomes
Ability to overcome the difficulties related to goal achievement tasks	Autonomy to function as a group and to fully engage in the project work
Behavioral routines are significant and necessary. When they are established, they become automatic.	The completion of the main recurring tasks included in a project leads to the establishment of routines.
Difficulty in setting up a relationship between individual learners	Establishment of a strong relationship between group members
The current of an individual DMC is rarely contagious	The current of a group-DMC is contagious and a group of students, a teacher, or a whole school can experience it together

Facilitating Group-DMC/SSF Experiences in Language Learning Classrooms

Regarding focused intervention frameworks, Dörnyei et al. (2016) suggested seven project templates (for more details, see Dörnyei et al. 2016, p. 177) that can be used with project-based learning to trigger group-DMCs. Additionally, these authors argued that a well-designed project should have the following characteristics to stimulate exceptional motivational flows: It should: (1) be authentic, (2) raise learners' curiosity and interest, (3) have clear goals, (4) shift roles (i.e., teachers become facilitators and learners become decision-makers), (5) integrate the four skills and develop them, (6) offer the classroom teacher an opportunity to provide learners with quality feedback, (7) and allow learners to be the owners of their project.

Studies related to the DMC theory have mainly focused on its applicability and validity. In so doing, they have scrutinized the existence of DMC characteristics and the situations that stimulate their occurrence to confirm their validity. To date, however, very few studies have examined the purposeful generation of group-DMCs with intensive project work used as an assessment instrument, nor have they investigated whether it can engage learners in assessment activities. Additionally, none of the previous studies has explored the purposeful facilitation of group-DMCs in the educational context of francophone Africa, although African international students have participated in studies conducted in Europe (e.g. Muir, 2016). To fill this empirical gap, the present study first examines the purposeful generation of group-DMC experiences using a project organized around the "The BIG Issue" template. Second, it explores the conditions that maintain learners' motivational surges when completing intensive project work used as an assessment tool. Third, it investigates whether a group-DMC can be used as an alternative in L2 assessment. To achieve these aims, the present study answers the following research questions:

1. Does intensive project work stimulate group-DMC experiences?

2. What are the conditions that sustain motivational flows when intensive project work is used as an assessment tool?

3. Can a group-DMC be used as an alternative in L2 assessment?

Research Methods

Intensive project work organized around the BIG Issue template as theorized by Dörnyei et al. (2016) was used as an assessment tool to purposefully trigger group-DMC/SSF experiences. The BIG Issue framework variant is built around real-life questions that generate interest and curiosity (Dörnyei et al., 2016). The issue must be relevant with flexible end goals that motivate learners to explore it. A group leader should also ensure that each individual learner is involved in the project from the beginning to the end. A project framed within the BIG Issue framework variant must have clear and specific goals. Learners should additionally be given opportunities to record their project work journey in a learner diary (Dörnyei et al., 2016). In the study, the "teacher-researcher" is used to refer to the author. "Students" are used to refer to the participants.

Setting and Participants

In Mali, English is taught as a compulsory foreign language from the seventh grade of elementary school to university. Teachers in the Malian EFL context mainly use a grammar translation method to teach English. Moreover, the hours devoted to learning and teaching English are limited (two or three hours a week). Despite the spread of the grammar translation method, it was not complicated to implement project-based learning in the Higher school of Journalism and Science of Communication because the school administration was motivated to make changes to enable their students to use English in real-life situations. Furthermore, my familiarity with the method made its implementation easier, and the school administration supported the change by letting me choose the syllabus and other teaching materials, including the assessment methods. Learners evaluated the teaching at the end of the course to facilitate decision-making at the level of the administration. They were also motivated to practice English genuinely, and they found that the teaching methods met the requirements that they had set for learning English.

The context for the present study was a general English course. Each semester, students of the Higher school of Journalism and Science of Communication have a 10-week English course that counts toward the validation of the License (first level university) degree in journalism. The teacher-researcher was teaching the class composed of 23 sophomores learning English as a foreign language, and all were willing to be informants for the present study. A convenient sampling technique was therefore used to select participants who were suitable. Among the selection criteria applied were: completion of all the diary entries (5 in total), attendance of all courses of the project (six courses), and group influence. The teacher-researcher succeeded in identifying influential students based on conferences, classroom observations, and diary entries. Based on these criteria, five students were selected among the 23 learners, although all were involved in diary writing. Among them, there were four male students and one female student, as illustrated in Table 2. They were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity as decided when they signed the written consent form.

Table 2
Participants' Profile

Participants' Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Proficiency Levels	English Learning Goals
Aliou	Male	24	Intermediate	To learn English for its own sake and use it in his future job: journalism
Hassan	Male	26	Intermediate	To carry on his studies of journalism
Mariama	Female	25	Intermediate	To become fluent in English and use it in her future job as a journalist
Sidiki	Male	21	Intermediate	To speak English fluently and use it in his future job as a journalist
Youssef	Male	26	Intermediate	To be fluent in English and use it in his professional career of journalism

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Becoming a Reporter Project

The project entitled "Becoming a Reporter" lasted six weeks, and its goal was to provide a 30-minute oral report in English to the class of an unusual and fascinating event that the learners had witnessed or experienced. The class met twice a week (Wednesday and Friday) and each course lasted two hours with a 15-minute break. The project was presented to the learners the first week of the course on Wednesday. On Friday, they discussed the components of the project with the teacher and they also formed small groups composed of three students (seven groups of three and one group of two). They also decided on the rules that governed the project work. The teacher instructed them to make an entry in their diary each week, that is, during the weekend at home following specific instructions (sample instructions will be shown in diary section) starting the second week of the project work. She informed them that their entries would be used to collect data during and after the project. They were also encouraged to have individual and group conferences with the teacher to receive feedback to improve their work in progress. Every week the teacher gave them 45 minutes to work on their project during her course. Additionally, the various groups could have conferences with her based on their demand to solve group-related problems both practical and linguistic, such as leadership, meetings outside the classroom, accuracy, and fluency. They also discussed the outlines suggested by the students for their project work.

After the stage of explanations, the groups chose a fascinating event that they wanted to report and submitted it to the teacher for approval. It is worth mentioning that the researcher acted as a facilitator so that the students could develop a sense of ownership of the project. Furthermore, she explained the assessment criteria so that they could get familiar with them and use them to improve their ongoing work. Therefore, the face-validity of the assessment instrument was increased. The project represented 40% of the final grade as described in Table 3.

Table 3
Assessment Criteria

Criteria	Percentage
Finding a topic that can arise interest and curiosity and making the report engaging	10%
Knowledge of the topic and presentation skills	10%
Fluency (learners can make errors that do not interfere with the overall understanding)	10%
Diary writing and overall involvement in the project work	10%
Total	40%

The "Becoming a Reporter" project was intended to develop the participants' communicative competence and give them an opportunity to practice English in real-life situations. In addition, the project was assigned to them so that they could select a topic and report it like a professional journalist. It can be deduced that the project goals included learners' individual English learning objectives as described in Table 2. To increase the authenticity of the assessment tool, the teacher-researcher allowed the students to invite their families or friends during the oral report to give them a real audience. The teacher also invited one of her colleagues to each presentation in order to increase the rater reliability.

Student Diary

Student diaries allow learners to write about their attitudes and affective feelings (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Genesee & Upshur, 1996). In the case of the present study, every week learners made an entry in English about their motivation and situations that triggered their motivated behavior, the difficulties, and the different steps they went through to achieve the goals set for their project work. To better understand group-DMC/SSF experiences, each participant reported about their group peers' motivational behaviors and the engagement of the group as an entity. However, the teacher did not give them any information about DMCs/SSF, although the diary writing was guided by specific writing instructions so that they could stay focused and report reliable information as can be seen in the writing instructions for weeks 2 and 4, displayed in Table 4.

Table 4
Writing Instructions for Weeks 2 and 4

Week 2 Entry Instruction	Week 4 Entry Instruction
What do you think of the project as your new assessment method? How enthusiastic were you and your group members to work on the project? Make an entry taking into account these questions. Share any personal things such as your motivational feelings or group peers' attitudes in "My Room" section.	How did you feel after three-week project work? As you have already formed your groups, what are the changes (motivation, working habits, and contributions) that you have noticed within your group? How did you solve some of the project-related difficulties? If you were the teacher, what would you change in the project so that it could reflect your personal and collective needs? Make an entry taking into account these aspects. You can share any other things that are not mentioned in the instructions, including your feelings in "My Room" section.

The teacher-researcher created a section called "My Room" in the entry so that the learners could share any project-related or personal experiences that were not covered in the writing instructions. In addition, the My Room section increased learners' ownership of their diary. Learners decided on the number of paragraphs or words that composed their entries. As a whole, the five participants made 30 entries. The teacher-researcher read learners' entries weekly and provided them with quality feedback so that they could solve certain difficulties related to the completion of their project. This phase is referred to as positive progress checks (Dörnyei et al., 2016). Finally, the aim of the learner diary was twofold: a learning and a data collection instrument.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from learners' diary entries was undertaken to get a better understanding of their engagement. The researcher was also interested in investigating whether the participants experienced purposefully-generated DMCs. I manually analyzed the data taking into account the generating parameters and features of group-DMCs. They were selected based on the recent studies related to the purposeful generation of group-DMCs (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Muir, 2016; Muir et al., 2020) as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Group-DMC Features and Generating Parameters

Features	Generating Parameters
Intense engagement/absorption	A project that gives voice to learners
Engagement despite difficulties	A project that reflects learners' identity
Endurance	Cohesive group with positive norms
Productivity out of expectations to achieve collective goals	Inspiring group leader
Exceptional motivational peaks	Autonomy to function inside and outside the classroom
Positive Emotionality	Authenticity
Salient routines	Establishment of collective goals

I identified other DMC features and generating situations, such as challenge-skill balance and project-related difficulties, that were frequently mentioned in the participants' entries.

To conduct data analysis, I first read the data several times with the help of a colleague to identify the features and generating conditions of group-DMCs. It is important to mention that reading the data to have a general understanding was not the end of the process because the researcher moved "back and forth over the data" (Harding & Whitehead, 2013, p. 134) until all the features and conditions were identified and classified under a theme named for the purpose. At the end of the iterative process, the researcher met the five participants to share with them the various themes, following the conclusions of Ibrahim (2020), who argues that rigor and close attention when analyzing qualitative data can improve its scientific validity. To conclude, the selected themes reflected what was commonly said by the five participants instead of being a simple justification for their comments.

Results

I identified five themes and two sub-themes after conducting a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from the participants' entries.

Theme 1: Exceptional Productivity

Exceptional productivity is a special effort investment during which a learner or group of learners exceed expectations to achieve a project work goal or a significant learning goal (e.g., winning a school competition or speaking a foreign language). They devote all their time and attention to their goal achievement task, although accomplishing these activities may not always be pleasant. Special effort investments are observable through learners' behaviors and learning habits inside and outside the classroom. The behavioral changes are so salient that other people notice them and provide learners with positive progress checks, supporting their intense effort investment (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Henry et al., 2015). The unique effort investments leading to exceptional motivational peaks are necessary for a DMC to take place whether they are individual or group-DMCs (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2016b). Learners in this state maintain their motivational flows until their goals are reached. During the first course, the teacher asked each student to introduce themselves by stating their motives for learning English. They all wanted to reach fluency in English, but they did not show a strong passion for English learning. After three weeks, there were noticeable changes in learners' behaviors: They came on time, they participated actively in the course, and nobody left before the end. The various groups already had a topic and a leader, and they became cohesive and autonomous. Group members also set routines so that they could achieve their project goals. For example, three groups met the teacher after regular class hours to discuss their project and to receive feedback to improve their work in progress. At this stage, certain participants stated that their groups had started working together smoothly. The satisfaction resulting from working efficiently as an entity induced them to engage in group work as seen in Mariama's week 4 entry:

> *The changes I have observed are about the roles and the contributions of my group friends. One girl who used to miss English classes surprised me with her strong engagement. She didn't miss classes anymore and she is very useful for our group because of her good ideas. For example, she is the one who proposed that we should interview a pastor, an imam, and a polytheist about the concept of death in their religions. She also decided that she will translate the interview into English.*

The changes observed in her behavior motivated other peers in the group to get involved in the project. In other words, her motivational currents were contagious and her group members could not resist them. The increase in learners' engagement has facilitated the pursuit of collective goals. Additionally, the more mature a group is with positive group norms, the more engaged its members are in surpassing themselves to achieve their collective goal. This is mentioned by Sidiki in his fourth entry:

> *The changes which I am going to write about are my group friends' roles. My two friends stopped arguing about little things and they obeyed me. For example, everybody did correctly his job and we met after the class hours in my room on campus and we discussed without any conflict. Now we are really united and we are progressing rapidly.*

Furthermore, the participants' entries revealed that each member of the different groups started producing beyond expectations when their groups became cohesive. For example, they focused all their attention and energy on the project so that they could achieve its goals with their own personal learning objectives as seen in one of Aliou's entries: "My group members were in the same boat when we began to understand one another and we worked together with determination and pleasure for the success of the group and our own interest". Mariama also explained that:

I have never worked like this before for a group project. I could do all the things I liked with my force. I really devoted all my force to this group project. I wanted to succeed it and ameliorate my speaking.

Hassan, on the other hand, claimed that "I was concentrated on my project from the first day to the reportage because I wanted to do something excellent in English and practice with my group". The intense engagement and the feeling of being different and exceptionally motivated are identical to DMC experiences. People experiencing DMCs generally have special feelings and they are capable of reaching their objectives despite the difficulties that they may encounter.

Theme 2. Congruence

A project is said to be congruent with learners' specific needs if it is connected with their identities, values, hopes, expectations, and learning vision or goal. Congruence is a core element in the purposeful generation of group-DMCs because it enables people experiencing DMCs to pursuit their actions, and thus reach a stage during which goal achievement becomes automatic and effortless. The absence of congruence may block the establishment of routines, which in turn prevents the successful initiation of group-DMCs. Congruence is necessary to trigger DMCs because it increases learners' ownership of the project. They may only participate effectively in project work if they feel "complete ownership" (Dörnyei et al., 2014, p. 15). Finally, congruence is important in project work and the purposeful facilitation of group-DMCs in educational settings because it gives learners the sensation that they are achieving their valued and desired learning goals as professionals in their field. These feelings of satisfaction with their performance have the potential to sustain DMC experiences, based on the results of Ibrahim's (2020) study.

The participants directly or indirectly mentioned that the project was congruent with their specific field. It gave them the opportunity to act like professional journalists:

It's a personal development. These researches help students to learn about their society and give them an opportunity to share them with their fellows. It's practical and instructive and less boring than asking students to sit and listen to a teacher for hours. (Aliou)

Additionally, the connectedness of the project with their field increased their interest and enthusiasm as shown in Youssef's second entry:

The project on which I worked is 'One corpse, two burials'. When I was working on it, I was motivated thanks to two things. First, the story of my presentation happened in our family. So it was a way for me to tell that incredible story. Second, I was motivated by the fact the project will permit me to practice the journalists' methodology of working.

Youssef and his group members were engaged in the project because it was related to their future

profession. Furthermore, they argued that the project helped them achieve their long-term English learning goals:

These sorts of projects help me reach my goals. Language learning is about four things; reading, writing, listening and speaking. I could find all these aspects in this project. And the project aimed at making us talk. That's really important in a French speaking country like ours where English is less spoken during daily conversations. (Aliou)

Like Youssef, Aliou had the opportunity to practice; therefore, he was completely engaged in the project.

Attachment to the Project Topic

Attachment to the project topic refers to the curiosity and passion that it incites, thus attracting learners. Another reason for the five participants' heightened engagement was the passion that they had toward the project topic. They each claimed that choosing the topic of their own assessment increased their motivation and interest, as noted by Aliou:

> *I was motivated because I was doing something in English on a topic that I like really. And this project was very important because it would determine how I will work. So, it was an obligation to me to prepare something relevant to me and to others. Our standing and our personality are also determined by our way of working. When we do well, we inspire others that learn from us.*

Hassan, in his fourth entry, also revealed that the project gave a voice to him and his peers: "The topics were interesting because they were about our concerns, and that pushed everybody to get involved and speak English in order to express their ideas".

Youssef also noted that the project gave him and his group some room to talk about a topic that they wanted to share: "It allows us to tell about a story of our own will, then evaluate our

different skills." Having their own voice may have also engaged these learners in the project.

Theme 3: Authenticity

In the field of L2 assessment, authenticity is achieved when an assessment reflects real-world situations (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). The authenticity of an assessment instrument is high if learners use the language to carry out activities (e.g., presenting orally in the target language or conducting interviews) that are usually accomplished by professionals or target language speakers. In the case of DMCs, a project that is congruent with learners' learning goals and values is authentic since completing it generates a feeling of satisfaction and confidence (Henry, 2019).

The participants explained that they were highly absorbed in their project work from the beginning to the end because of its authenticity and the fact that it allowed them to analyze their topics in depth. They stated that this activity helped them reach their long-term learning goal, and thus induced absorption in the project. To express authenticity, they used phrases such as "unique", "original", and "profound" as explained by Youssef and Sidiki when comparing the assessment instrument with the traditional assessment tools in their second entries:

> *Becoming a Reporter Project is unique as method of evaluation. It takes care of evaluating students speaking and writing skills. Also, it permits students to boost their confidence through the oral presentation. And as future journalists, the master of these different skills is very important.*

Having something that they could measure at the end of the English course motivated these learners to produce results that went beyond their usual performance. Additionally, I noticed that they were more engaged whenever they were able to express themselves in English or achieve an important subgoal. For example, Aliou was more committed to achieving his final goals when he succeeded in interviewing an English-speaking person as part of the project.

Similarly, Sidiki mentioned that an oral presentation project used as an assessment tool encouraged students to deeply reflect on their responses in contrast to the selected response tests that did not require them much reflection or effort:

> *It was an original way to evaluate our English level. Because the advantage of this method is that it allows the student to be in a practice situation in front of his classmates. Besides, it pushes the student to study in profoundness his topic. In short, I really think that this method of evaluation is more beneficial than the classic way (giving a text and comprehension question) in which the student is focused just about the way he can get the average [average means passing grade].*

The exceptional engagement may also be explained by the fact that completing the project as a whole allowed them to recognize and appreciate their true abilities.

Theme 4: Positive Emotionality

Positive emotionality is the enjoyment derived from achieving a significant goal or being closer to it. It is one of the core characteristics of a DMC (Dörnyei et al., 2014). Additionally, it is defined as the "enjoyment experienced carrying out activities recognized as transporting the individual closer to their goal" (Henry et al., 2015, p. 332). Other motivational and emotional feelings such as satisfaction, confidence, happiness, and pride also sustained DMCs (Ibrahim, 2016b; 2020). Positive emotionality can therefore be achieved after working on a project that is congruent with learners' long-term learning goals. Decontextualized traditional assessment in the form of multiple-choice questions or matching may not produce a strong emotional response because their completion may not require a high cognitive process or an exceptional effort investment. Intensive project work, on the other hand, involves the use of the four skills and other real-life skills so that learners can reach a final goal. Its completion transports them to a new stage in the process of learning, hence a feeling of satisfaction and pride.

The analysis of the data collected from the participants indicates that their emotional feelings such as confidence, pride, and satisfaction increased their absorption in the project and helped them maintain their motivational drive until they presented their final report. They used phrases such as "confident", "proud" "satisfied", and "amazing" to describe their feelings when they were absorbed in their task as seen in one of Mariama's entries:

> *I was feeling confident and more interested in the project whenever I was with my group because I could see that we are doing something that will help us to practice English. This feeling of being confident and proud was general and it helps us to remain concentrated and motivated until we present our project to the class.*

Additionally, feeling more confident and prouder reduced these participants' test taking anxiety. As a result, they were more involved in the project work as described by Aliou in one of his entries:

> *When I remarked that I could speak my English and people also understood me because during the project I worked with some Nigerians and I could understand them and vice versa. To describe my feelings after these wonderful moments, I can say that I was very satisfied, less nervous, and very confident. I was like in the cloud. I could see that I could do anything that I wanted and this created a certain pride in me.*

During the various conferences with the students, I also noticed that the more confident they were, the more focused they were on their project work. They were so committed that completing the various tasks included in the project became automatic and effortless although they implicitly made considerable effort. It can be suggested that completing the project as a whole was not always enjoyable, but their engagement made it bearable and enjoyable. The closer a learner gets to an important goal or vision, the more motivated they are to achieve it (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2015).

Confidence and Satisfaction with Performance

All five participants wrote in their entries that they felt confident and satisfied with their performance due to the effort that they had invested in the project, as mentioned by Sidiki in his sixth entry:

> *I feel really confident and proud after my oral report. Because I realized that my effort of documentation and research about the topic help me to master my topic and reporting it with confidence. It would be amazing for me to have again this experience and work on a project like this.*

These participants considered confidence as a motivating factor because they lack opportunities to use their English in real-life situations. Moreover, I noticed that they wanted their teachers to reassure them by giving them quality feedback that they could use to improve their work in progress. These positive progress checks permitted them to surpass themselves in their classroom performance and exceed their own expectations.

In the same vein, Hassan in his sixth entry argued that he was satisfied with his performance and he wanted to relive his motivational experiences:

> *I was really satisfied and confident after my oral report because I was at ease during the presentation. It was a topic that I mastered and I have well prepared. So, I spoke without any complex. And if it is to be repeated, I will be really happy to work on another good topic because such project permits both the presenter and his classmates to learn about a topic and improve their English.*

Youssef also explained that:

> *It was amazing to live such an incredible experience because of the project. I felt proud and strong after each success, so I was committed to a point that it was difficult to fail in the project or to stop working on it. I can say that my satisfaction and confidence guided my actions.*

Youssef's explanations show that affective feelings such as wonder, pride, satisfaction, and confidence can fuel a learner engagement and encourage them to persist in doing their actions.

Theme 5: Difficulty and Challenge-Skill Balance

The level of difficulty can motivate or demotivate a learner while working on a project. If learners are convinced that their skills allow them to deal with the difficulties related to the successful completion of a project, they may be interested in completing it. However, they can be bored and less enthusiastic about the project if their skills do not allow them to deal with the challenges included in it. The perception of feasibility is also a condition for DMCs to occur (Dörnyei et al., 2014). In other words, being able to achieve a project goal stimulates a feeling of satisfaction and confidence that guides future motivated behavior. This aspect is significant in language learning, which seems to be a lifelong process. Therefore, adapting the project difficulty to learners' current level can help students sustain motivation, own their project, and effectively perform its component tasks (Dörnyei et al., 2014).

All the participants recognized that their skills allowed them to handle the difficulties related to the completion of the project, as confirmed by Mariama in her sixth entry: "It was not always easy to do this project but I always found solutions to my problems. The difficulty did not prevent me to succeed. It augmented my motivation and bring me to discover new things". The explanations support the conclusion that learners were aware of the difficulties related to the completion of the project, but were convinced that it was not out of their reach. In other words, handling these

challenges helped them access new knowledge that was beyond their control through negotiations and conferences with the teacher. Moreover, the challenges included in the completion of the project helped them stay engaged and attentive, as shown in Youssef's comment:

> *As to accomplish the project was difficult and challenging, I remained concentrated and attentive because distractions could prevent us from realizing our goal. I can say those difficulties were necessary because they encouraged us to remain motivated and engaged during all the project work.*

A level of difficulty that matches participants' skills motivates them to engage in actions such as interviewing Anglophones and speaking English in front of a real audience to achieve the project goals. For example, Aliou spent a whole week working on his interview questions with his group members to impress his anglophone interviewee as seen in one of his entries: "It was such a kind of challenge for me because I wanted to attract him with my English". Sidiki, on the other hand, explained that "the project was challenging. In order to overcome this, I tell to myself that I must work hard and put all the chance in my side to do a good performance". As these reflections illustrate, it is necessary to balance a project's level of difficulty with learners' skills to avoid demotivation or disengagement.

Discussion

This study examined the purposeful generation of group-DMCs and the conditions that sustained absorption while using intensive project work as an assessment tool. The findings indicated that participants' exceptional productivity and enjoyment were identical to the group-DMC sequences as theorized by Dörnyei et al. (2016) and Dörnyei et al. (2015).

Exceptional productivity, a salient feature of DMCs based on Ibrahim (2016b), and a core element of intensive project, motivates learners to be fully focused on their goal achievement activities. The feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction that is generated by exceptional effort investments sustains learners' motivation and increases their level of automaticity. Automaticity, one of the twelve principles of language learning (Brown, 2007), gives learners the impression that they are reaching their goals effortlessly, hence a strong absorption in the activities that they are carrying out. When an L2 teacher is able to facilitate this type of absorption during the assessment period, learners will forget their anxiety and become confident, allowing successful learning to take place. In the present study, noticeable recurrent routines, such as students outdoing themselves, coming to school on time, successfully accomplishing the tasks assigned to them, participating actively in group debates, and speaking English with group peers were effort investments that engaged participants in their English learning through intensive project work. In other words, they stayed focused on their project goal achievement from the third week to the end. These behavioral changes reflect the motivational boost of DMCs and the definition of L2 learning engagement by Hiver et al. (2021). They argued that engaged learners are focused on their learning whether it is enjoyable or not, and they persist in their actions until they reach their desired goal because "…without engagement meaningful learning is unlikely" (Hiver et al., 2021, p. 2). Similarly, DMC specialists explain that complete absorption/engagement drives persons experiencing motivational surges to give considerable effort to their goal achievement tasks (Henry, 2019; Ibrahim, 2016a). In other words, these persons are so concerned with their goals that they endure fatigue until they realize their vision. The same level of engagement can be reached when a project is well designed. This may explain why Dörnyei et al. (2016) and Almulla (2020) suggested project-based learning as a framework to actively engage learners. While, it is difficult to claim that each individual learner's high motivation was identical to DMC experiences, the various groups experienced purposefully generated motivational flows and outdid themselves to reach their collective goals. In conclusion, the finding suggests that intensive project work can

be used in educational settings to trigger exceptional productivity, which in turn boosts learners' motivation until final goal achievement.

Additionally, the findings reveal that authenticity and congruence are the conditions that sustained learners' engagement. These features are referenced by Dörnyei et al. (2016) as criteria for successful project work. They also support Almulla's (2020) finding indicating that there is a correlation between project authenticity and learner engagement. The more authentic a project is, the more engaged learners are in it. Quality feedback offered by the teacher after reading learners' entries also facilitated goal achievement and maintained students' energized behavior until they presented their oral reports. It may have also offered the groups an opportunity to handle the challenges related to the completion of the project. In other words, it made the project feasible for them. The perception of feasibility can encourage persons experiencing motivational currents to continue making effort until they attain their goal. They "may only continue in a DMC if they have a clear and ongoing perception that they are on track towards reaching their vision" (Dörnyei et al., 2014, p. 15). If learners are convinced that their skills allow them to effectively carry out the assessment activities, its validity will increase. The finding, although not identified as a theme by the present study, may have sustained the informants' motivational flows.

Furthermore, the results suggest that a level of difficulty that was proportional to learners' skills enabled their absorption in the project. In particular, the new knowledge that they could access through negotiations with their peers, library research, and interactions (diary communication and conferences) with the classroom teacher may have helped students sustain their engagement, while the progress they made despite difficulties and challenges motivated individuals experiencing DMCs to produce results that exceeded their expectations. Diary communication also played an important role in maintaining participants' exceptional engagement because it allowed the teacher to provide learners with positive progress checks. According to Dörnyei et al. (2016), Dörnyei et al. (2015), positive progress checks facilitate the achievement of future actions. Additionally, they are regarded as motivational teaching strategies (Mauludin, 2021). Therefore, their absence can prevent total engagement, which helps learners persevere with their actions until they achieve their final goal. Finally, it can be inferred that project work facilitates the use of the language as a social tool regardless of the learning context. This method has the potential to transform rote L2 learning into interaction, in a context (e.g., Malian EFL context) where using the language to perform a real-world activity is a luxury for a learner.

The results further indicate that the high level of confidence and satisfaction during the "Becoming a Reporter" Project increased learners' motivation levels. The energy generated by their motivated behaviors fueled absorption in the project. Thus, it can be assumed that the participants' heightened motivation was partially supplied and maintained by their confidence because of the use of the project as an assessment tool. These findings are supported by Ibrahim's (2020) study, which found that positive affect can sustain DMCs and enable individuals experiencing them to achieve their goals. In other words, his findings infer that vision and the salient structure may not be only factors accountable for intense motivational surges.

Another important result of the present study suggests that group-DMCs that are intentionally generated through intensive group project work can be used as an alternative to other traditional assessment instruments (e.g. selected response questions) in L2 classrooms. Using intensive project work as an alternative in L2 assessment does not mean that it can completely replace other types of assessment. However, it can help a learner obtain a tangible outcome that facilitates goal setting and decision-making for future learning. Other positive characteristics that support the use of intensive project work as an alternative in L2 assessment are explained by the fact it has some similarities with group-DMCs/SSF. For example, they are both characterized by high authenticity, heightened motivation, and exceptional productivity based on the results of the present study. The more a learner produces during project work used an assessment tool, the more motivated

and engaged they are during the process of assessment. Moreover, learners who can complete a real-life task that is usually accomplished by the target language community are more confident and less nervous during an assessment.

Pedagogical Implications

Intensive group project work can be used as an alternative in L2 assessment to generate engagement and exceptional productivity. Regarding the implementation of group-DMCs in a language classroom, teachers first need to use one or a combination of group-DMC project templates developed by Dörnyei et al. (2016). Second, they should secure the following conditions while designing their project work: Authenticity, congruence, positive emotionality, and challenge-skill balance so that learners' intense engagement can be maintained when they are achieving their project goals. Finally, a teacher's capacity to offer learners quality feedback throughout the whole process of project work can enhance its feasibility and help learners stay on track until the achievement of their collective goals. However, a language teacher should bear in mind that a DMC is not an everyday motivational construct. It requires learners to make exceptional and remarkable effort to achieve their goal (Ibrahim, 2020).

Conclusion

The results and their discussion imply that intensive project work framed within the "The BIG Issue" project template can induce purposeful group-DMC experiences during the process of assessment. Participants' heightened motivation and absorption were sustained by the congruence and authenticity that characterized the project. The level of project-related difficulty that matched the challenge-skill balance additionally increased the informants' confidence, which fueled their intense motivation until the end of the project. Purposefully facilitated group-DMCs can also be used as an alternative in L2 or EFL assessment to induce intense engagement and exceptional productivity. As each teaching context is unique, a project must be adapted to the learners' specific needs and teaching goals so that they can be totally engaged in it. A limitation of the study could be related to the participants' social desirability bias in diary entries. However, the researcher used explicit instructions to encourage honesty and openness in order to mitigate these biases, such as: "Your diary is yours", and "there are no good or bad entries" and "all your entries are helpful". Entries were also graded based on completion, not content. Further studies are necessary to generalize the findings of the study. For example, future research related to the DMC theory should first be oriented toward the exploration of the other project templates. Second, researchers should investigate learners' linguistic production during DMC experiences. Third, mixed research methods could be used to collect data from a large number of participants.

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