



Thinking through Collaborative Projects in the Language Classroom

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“No matter where, what, or whom one teaches, creating a learning community is essential to promoting learning at home, school, and the work place. In order to live, learn, and work together effectively, we need to be able to listen to one another, to work together to identify and solve problems, and to acknowledge and respect diverse points of view”
(Project Zero, 2016).

Creating a Classroom Community

Creating a classroom community is a priority for language classes because of the importance of developing communicative language skills with each other. For many students, there are few opportunities to speak the target language outside of class, so time in class must be maximized for practice. In order for the classroom space to be welcoming for students to communicate and work well with each other, a sense of community must be established first.

Creating a sense of community in the classroom includes demonstrating trust, equality, and respect for all. Within a communicative language class, students will be expected to work, listen, and respond to each other. Collaboration is a 21st century skill for work and life. These skills include working effectively and respectfully with diverse members of a team, showing flexibility and willingness to compromise toward achieving a common goal, and

sharing responsibility for collaborative work, all while valuing each team member’s contributions (Grahn & McAlpine, 2017).

Beginning the academic year with the expectation of developing a classroom community allows for student engagement to be optimized through a variety of group activities. Learning another language is not effectively done when in isolation or alone. Students must learn to work in groups in order to communicate ideas, practice language structures, and engage in understanding others’ perspectives. A few examples of activities that encourage the development of a classroom community are Find-Someone-Who games, QR Code Scavenger Hunts, and Hold the Baton/Stack the Tower.

Grouping Students

Working in groups within a language classroom can be exciting and motivating for many students. During group activities, students have the possibility of working



alongside other students with a range of strengths, which ultimately promotes growth opportunities. Teachers may opt to strategically assign groups based on student abilities and relationships. This may be appropriate for long-term projects where students will have to work together for more than one class period. There are many engaging ways to group students for shorter activities, such as pair work. As an example, students can use a printout of a clock to schedule appointment times with other students for partner activities. The teacher assigns the activity a time on the clock and students match up with that appointment partner for the task. To get the entire class moving on their feet, students can arrange themselves in a line based on their birthdays, height, or alphabetized name and then fold the line in the middle so that students are facing the person who will be their partner. Keeping these activities in the target language also helps students practice communicating with each other.

When group work is carefully structured, students can achieve many goals and outcomes through a variety of tasks and presentations. Working with their peers can often encourage interactions and support sustained engagement. Scaffolding is a common way to structure group work by providing the support for students to successfully complete a task. Supports can include graphic organizers for outlining projects, modeling an example of a task, and providing clear criteria for completing a task with a rubric or checklist. Providing scaffolding supports during group work

maximizes efficiency in presenting the task requirements in a clear way, keeps students on task, and presents examples and sources for finding information, all of which reduce student anxiety and uncertainty so that they can focus on completing the work successfully.

Strategies for Managing Projects and Activities

There are several ways to facilitate group work so that students have the opportunity to take the lead and demonstrate their learning. Assigning student roles for project work and offering project completion checklists with detailed rubrics are some ways to encourage students to manage their time effectively and hold themselves accountable for completing the task as expected.

Providing a rubric for how a project will be evaluated is a form of scaffolding as it guides students with a clear outline of the expectations of the task for quality completion. Project checklists are also useful for students who may benefit from breaking down a large task into smaller chunks or need the details broken down into parts. This type of formative check-in may encourage them to stay on task and benefit from less feelings of anxiety when tasks take a long time to complete. Another way to keep students accountable for their work and participation in group projects is to have them keep a work log to document the date, a description of what they did on the task for that day, and the plan for what they will do next. These logs can be kept in the classroom for the teacher to have access to review before the next class

meeting time, if there are any concerns about participation efforts or confusion about the activity.

Students should also have responsibility for managing their progress and performance. Self-assessments and peer-assessments/evaluations are ways to have students reflect on their participation in a group activity and provide feedback on the input of other group members. One form of peer-assessment is the “Feedback Cheeseburger.” When using this strategy, students will provide both constructive compliments and criticism on the other person’s work, sandwiching the compliments on what they did well with the meat of the matter, or criticism, for what they could improve upon.

To conclude, projects are one way to assess student understanding and comprehension of a unit or larger concept. Projects can be assigned as a long-term assignment for an individual, a summative assessment for an entire class, or as an alternative form of assessment with design and choice input from student groups. See Ghiath’s (2002) article on using cooperative learning for alternative assessments if you wish to explore this further. Blaz (2016) suggests that projects have the element of

“engageability” so that all students can participate by doing, communicating their learning, identifying the next steps to complete, and engaging in application of the content through real-world tasks.

Managing projects can be challenging for both the teacher and students. Curtain and Dahlberg (2016) offer step-by-step guidelines for helping teachers plan effectively for designing and implementing group activities in the language classroom. In addition to the ideas already mentioned in this article, they suggest setting clear expectations regarding the use of the target language and preparing them with the language that they will need to use in the activity. This can be done by providing example sentence starters as a visual reference for communicative activities and modeling how to complete each component of a project step by step. Another idea is to use a system for students to work in pairs or groups to check each other’s work for correctness, which gives the teacher more time to circle the room and monitor language use and participation.

For more ideas on self-directed projects for individuals, read Malcolm and Rindfleisch’s (2003) article in *American English - English Teaching Forum* for ideas using technology with project.



References

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