Making Language Learning Meaningful and Fun with Collaborative Projects

A. Louise Cole

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Citation
COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND THE L2 (SECOND LANGUAGE) CLASSROOM

Collaborative learning requires students to actively engage with others, typically fellow students, to achieve a common goal (Nokes-Malach et al, 2015). The form of this collaboration may vary from prescriptive, teacher-facilitated activities to more open-ended and reflective projects. Within the L2 classroom, students work toward language proficiency. The current World-Readiness Standards for Language Learners evaluate linguistic abilities in speaking, listening, reading, and writing but also require that students develop cultural competencies and understanding. In this vein, Oxford posits that within a collaborative learning framework, the notion of community should be extended beyond the language-learning classroom to include the community of those who speak the target language: “L2 learning can be a global adventure that involves learning about, understanding, and (at least to some extent) identifying with another culture in which people use a different language, possibly in a completely different part of the world” (1997, p. 449). Collaborative learning assignments within the L2 classroom can be used to help students develop both linguistic proficiency in the target language and cultural competencies.

SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning activities within the L2 classroom have the potential to aid students in developing both linguistic proficiency and cultural competencies. Nokes-Malach et al (2015) identify cognitive and social mechanisms that lead to group failure and success in collaborative learning. Within the L2 classroom, students participating in collaborative projects use several of the cognitive mechanisms for success while practicing and improving their linguistic proficiencies, such as cueing each other’s prior knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, relying on complementary knowledge to fill in each other’s linguistic gaps, gaining re-exposure to material already covered, and employing error correction using the collective knowledge of the group. Collaborative assignments that require students to interact with authentic materials from the target language culture also encourage the use of successful social mechanisms, such as the construction of a common ground among group members in order to understand the materials and negotiating multiple perspectives as group members compare and contrast their own cultural contexts with that of the target language culture.

CONCLUSIONS

In both prescriptive and open-ended collaborative activities, students employed successful cognitive and social mechanisms, such as cueing one another’s prior knowledge, error correction, and negotiating multiple perspectives.

When surveyed, students had mixed feelings about the collaborative learning activities. For example, one student enjoyed doing "constructive and creative things with other people" in groups while another found group work less useful than individual work because not all participants contributed equally. While collaborative learning activities in the L2 classroom can be valuable, maximizing successful outcomes is a challenge.

METHODS

Over the course of a semester, I incorporated a range of collaborative learning activities in my elementary Spanish I and II classes. The activities were based on the themes of the chapters covered in the textbook, ¡Anda!Curso Elemental. These activities encouraged students to develop their linguistic proficiency in the target language as well as their cultural understanding of the countries in the assigned chapters.

Activities ranged from the prescriptive to the open-ended. One example of a prescriptive assignment required Elementary Spanish I students to practice describing location within a city using the verb estar, prepositional phrases, and vocabulary from the chapter. Using Google Maps en español, groups navigated the capital of the country they had chosen in order to answer assigned questions about the location of specific landmarks using the grammar and vocabulary from the chapter and then presented to the class.

Assignments that were more open-ended allowed students greater creativity, such as an assignment that required Elementary Spanish II students to create a day’s worth of meals for the country their group had chosen and then present their menu to the class. For this assignment, students had to use the food vocabulary they had learned from the chapter and learn additional vocabulary based on the recipes they chose to showcase.

REFERENCES


World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages