

## **STUDENTS PRACTICE CONTROLLED CHAOS IN THE WORLD LANGUAGE CLASS**

By Elsa Woodaman, Upper School French Teacher and Director of X-Term

How might participating in a student-directed collaborative project in an upper level language class foster authentic language use?

### **AREA OF STUDY**

Having taught for over twenty years, I was interested in finding a new way to fuel student desire to communicate more naturally in Spanish. Too often I observed that my students felt limited by artificial speaking activities that were based on assigned vocabulary and grammar points. I witnessed disinterest or frustration with topics that were guided by the textbook vocabulary and unrelated to their own interests or passions.

Compared to younger students, high school students have more defined personalities, are more conscious of their preferences, and often thrive in social situations. This is especially true in coed classrooms like my own, where young men and women are genuinely interested in sharing



ideas and experiences. As a result, the imposed topic (or grammar) approach to classroom discussion, while providing opportunities for successful communication, can be boring and unmotivating for students. Even worse, these rote exchanges rarely create that spark of curiosity that spills outside of the classroom and motivates further learning.

Like all conversation, speaking in a foreign language requires a high tolerance for chaos and adaptability. You can start a conversation about your pets and end up talking about the environment and the fate of the polar bear. I am a Venezuelan-American who grew up in a bilingual home and moved to the States for high school. I spent my senior year of high school in France, studied Portuguese in college, and involved myself socially with French and Portuguese speakers every chance I could. As a result, my own experience with language acquisition has been primarily through immersion. I found that my best “speaking and listening” learning took place outside of the classroom.

All of this professional and personal experience became the catalyst for the nagging question: how could I replicate a more meaningful communication experience in the classroom? This question generated even further concern. What would I, as the teacher, have to sacrifice to allow the natural chaos of authentic conversation to rule? Would students even be able to speak in the freeform way authentic exchanges take place?

**HOW COULD I REPLICATE  
A MORE MEANINGFUL  
communication experience  
in the classroom?**

**WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US**

Research indicates that students are more motivated and excited to learn about topics they can choose on their own, thus the upsurge in student inquiry-based learning methodologies such as “genius hour” and “20% time.” This type of collaborative learning has even been described as a “twenty-first century trend” that shifts learning from the individual to the group (Laal and Laal, 2012, pg. 491). “Genius hour” and “20% time” refer to the practice of deliberately setting aside significant amounts of class time for inquiry and student-centered collaborative learning. These opportunities foster intrinsic motivation in which students “are able to learn what they want,

they are rewarded through the act of gaining knowledge and demonstrating that knowledge” (Juliani, 2014, pg.5). Furthermore, project-based learning improves “motivation, attitude toward learning, and work habits” (pg. 30). Numerous other studies find that inquiry-based learning provides students with opportunities to “...experience academic engagement through feelings of relevance and choice, the knowledge that their work and learning matters and is valued by themselves and by others” (Buchanan, Harlan, Bruce & Edwards, 2016, pg. 1).

There has been scholarly study that considers the issue of the affective filter in second language acquisition. Researcher Xiaoyan Du states, “The affective filter acts as a barrier to acquisition. The filter is up when the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in confidence, or concerned with failure. The filter is down when the acquirer is not anxious and is trying to become a member of the group speaking” (2009, pg. 162). Therefore, a class discussion that is predicated on textbook-centric vocabulary or grammar raises the affective filter, increasing a student’s psychological barrier to communicating effectively. Uninterested in the information being discussed, the student may also be nervous about using vocabulary that is not contextualized in the his own experience. These factors, contributing to a rise of the affective filter, could be a detriment to classroom use of authentic language.

Collaborative projects promote active communication through brainstorming, dynamic discussion, and organization of a project. A recent study concluded that “traditional language teaching... involves teacher-centered learning... making students aware of certain aspects of language without providing sufficient practice. Collaborative learning, in contrast, shares some characteristics in common with communicative language teaching, which highlights both interaction and communication among students and between students and teachers” (Sumtsova et al., 2018, page 162).

## **METHOD**

Armed with these scholarly findings, I was motivated to allow a class of senior Spanish students to try their hand at project-based learning in an environment where I would take a backseat for an entire class period every week for a month.

During these 45 minute project sessions, groups of 2-3 students researched a chosen topic online, discussed the topic, and compiled factual information. They could only utilize authentic Spanish language websites, and they were required to speak Spanish. Their topics were creative and varied, ranging from the Kardashians to drug smuggling. Their goal was to record a final Spanish-language product of their choice; options included interviews, “mockumentaries,” and simple narratives. Using a rubric, I made it clear to the students that they were being graded on both the process during the project creation as well as the final product. I gathered data through individual and group interviews, observation (some filmed), and a post-experience survey.

## **STUDENT ENTHUSIASM WENT UP SIGNIFICANTLY**

as they worked on this project, and the students were using Spanish in a more authentic way than I'd witnessed in the past.

## **FINDINGS**

After analyzing the data, I discovered several recurring themes.

Student enthusiasm went up significantly as they worked on this project, and the students were using Spanish in a more authentic way than I'd witnessed in the past. They seemed happier and more willing to speak in Spanish, and in some cases, were taking the time to look up vocabulary outside of class to communicate better. In a survey response, one student reflected, “I find myself actually challenging myself to only speak in Spanish.” Another student noted, “I liked trying to speak in Spanish in a more natural way, in conversations that I would already be having. It is not forced.” The most succinct expression of the project's goal came from another student who stated, “It was more than just prompted speaking, it was genuine.”

The students looked forward to “genius hour” days, and it was not until the project's end, requiring the creation of a final product, that several of the students complained. They reverted back to feeling the tedium of regular academic restrictions. A dissatisfied student shared this opinion: “I do like to discuss things I like, but I wish it wasn't a formal project.”

By and large, the quality of the final projects were similar to previous content-based group projects that required students to use both class and home time to complete. High achieving and middle of the road students excelled in class discussions, but in contrast, their final products matched the quality of their previous work. Not surprisingly, a group of low achieving students did not invest themselves fully in the experience. They spoke very little during discussions and ultimately produced a subpar final product.

## PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

I will continue to incorporate group project-based learning activities in my classroom in order to spark authentic language use. I will, however, tweak the process. In the future I will allow time for genius hour several times every semester. I will also assign more research at home to maximize communication time in class. Regarding the final project, I will experiment with providing a variety of new and different presentation options. I may even consider eliminating the projects altogether to investigate whether their absence further enhance authentic classroom conversations. I plan to share my findings with the rest of the World Languages Department since project-based learning has been a topic of interest among my peers.

## REFERENCES

- Buchanan, S. s., Harlan, M. M., Bruce, C. c., & Edwards, S. s. (2016). Inquiry Based Learning Models, Information Literacy, and Student Engagement: A literature review. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 22(2), 23-39.
- Du, X. (2009). The Affective Filter in Second Language Teaching. *Asian Social Science*, 5(8).
- Juliani, A.J. (2015) *Inquiry and Innovation in the Classroom: Using 20% Time, Genius Hour, and PBL to Drive Student Success*. New York: Routledge.
- Laal, M., & Laal, M. (2012). Collaborative learning: what is it? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 31, 491-495.
- Sumtsova, O. ), Aikina, T. ), Bolsunovskaya, L. ), Phillips, C. ), Zubkova, O. ), & Mitchell, P. ). (2018). Collaborative learning at engineering universities: Benefits and challenges. *International Journal Of Emerging Technologies In Learning*, 13(1), 160-177. doi:10.3991/ijet.v13i01.7811

---

**THE CENTER  FOR THE  
STUDY OF BOYS**

---

711 St. Christopher's Road  
Richmond, VA 23226

**educatingboys.com**  
**804.282.3185**

The Center for the Study of Boys at St. Christopher's School promotes best practices for engaging and teaching boys through research, professional development and programming.

©2018 All rights reserved.



**St. Christopher's School**  
*Educating Boys For Life*