

Building Community in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the anxiety a student feels in a foreign language course. In order to lessen this feeling and create community or cohesion among students in the class, we offer practical suggestions for group work and theatrical productions. The role of the professor in facilitating this process is also discussed in terms of creating a more student-centered class.

How do faculty create community in the classroom? Open and truthful communication is the key. Both the words community and communicate are derived from the Latin *commūnis* “common.” We have something in common with all of our students. We too were beginning learners of the language in which we are now considered experts. We have to communicate to them that we understand what they are going through because we too had to learn the language. This does not mean we should “baby” our students, but we should be empathetic with them. We also need to create a classroom community in which students are free to meet fellow students and realize that they are not the only “strugglers.” Such an environment promotes more truthful discussion of the problems the students are facing and bridges the gap between professors and students.

Open lines of communication are one way to create community among students and between student and professor. In the foreign language classroom language complicates communication since language skills are limited. In this paper we will discuss ways to create classroom community by describing what we use to bring motivated and not-so-motivated students together and by pondering the classroom relationship between teacher and students.

Reducing Anxiety and Increasing Trust

During class registration some students spend countless hours asking around “Who’s the easiest Spanish teacher?” or reworking their whole life schedule to avoid taking the “native” teacher. This, of course, also applies to other anxiety-provoking courses. Why did we or do our students do this? Most professors do not think of themselves or their colleagues as threatening. The fact is that many students are simply scared to death to take a foreign language, especially if they have never had one before. From the outset, the word “foreign” conjures up fear, something that is unknown, something that cannot be related to, or, for many students a subject that is just plain alien. To temper these fears, we have to be user-friendly educators. Students are scared enough about the language and should not also have to be frightened of coming to their teachers for help. In fact, when students ask, “Who’s the easiest?” they probably are referring to who has the best rapport with students or in whose class they will feel most comfortable.

Most of a traditional college age student’s success depends on what their peers think of them. Imagine what being in a class where you cannot even pronounce the words or put a whole sentence together can do for student morale and reputation. Non-traditional students have probably been in the work force, have a family, already feel pressure about being the only “golden oldie” in the class, and now have the added pressure of not being able to produce a coherent sentence. The feeling of being evaluated as unintelligent by peers could be worse than being evaluated similarly by the professor. This dual fear of evaluation definitely compounds the problem of creating community. Students begin to

experience fear before they even attend the first class meeting. We need to discuss their anxiety on the first day of class. Therefore, faculty from day one must be armed with ammunition to combat students' anxiety.

One of the ways we can do this is to earn our students' trust which will create a more comfortable environment in which they can be open to taking risks with the language in class with the likelihood that mistakes will be made. As Stephen Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis implies, students with low affective filters are more open to receive and acquire comprehensible language input whereas those with high affective filters will be impeded in language learning. Krashen states, "The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation" (1982, p. 32). Williams (1991) notes that a low-anxiety state may have a facilitating function and a high-anxiety state a debilitating effect. Thus, a little anxiety is not a bad thing because it keeps the students on task. However, anxiety should only occur in healthy doses. If not, we risk our retention rate of students who may find themselves wanting to minor or even major in Spanish.

As all faculty who have taught before know, the first day of class sets the scene for what is to come. Without seeming schizophrenic, how do we get across to our students that we are empathic to their language learning, that we know it is not easy, yet we still have to hold them to a certain standard and are going to immerse them (or as they read it, make their lives miserable) by possibly speaking only in the target language? It is not easy. We cannot expect our students to trust us after only one class meeting, but we can certainly make them feel better about being in the class and begin lowering their affective filters. How do we do this? We use humor, anecdotes of our language learning, and try to give the students a sense of who we are so that they come away thinking we are somewhat human. In a foreign language course,

especially a beginning course, we exchange all kinds of personal information. Faculty try to get the students accustomed to this on the first day by giving our personal information. We find that adding stories of linguistic mishaps in the foreign language also helps to break the ice. By personalizing our experiences through anecdotes we not only demonstrate our humanness but we accomplish other goals as well. We share with our students' examples of our own vulnerable experience when we may have felt stupid or laughed at while at the same time showing them that we survived it! This sharing facilitates opening the doors of honesty by admitting that we are not perfect. In addition we are open to discussing language-learning issues in the classroom and in our offices. Finally, we are using the stories as a common link between faculty and students. Taking a couple of minutes to share funny or perhaps embarrassing tales is one way to lower the affective filter and put the students more at ease. They see that we do not expect them to be perfect after 16 weeks of instruction.

In many foreign language classrooms that insist on one hundred percent use of the target language, truth is not practiced. We should not evade questions or invent answers. If we do not know, we say, "I don't know, but I'll find out and get back to you." This gains more student respect than bluffing our way through an answer. Why then do some foreign language teachers say "No comprendo" *I don't understand* or simply pretend to not understand when a student asks or comments in English? The truth is we do understand. We are compromising our integrity with our students by lying when they all know that, of course, their teacher understands English. If we insist on students asking in the target language when they cannot articulate, we are breaking the lines of communication. If the question is one students should be capable of articulating at that level, then the teacher should simply say "Por favor, haz la pregunta en español" *Please ask in Spanish*.

If students cannot express the question, then this can be used as a brief exercise in teaching circumlocution, or a different easier way to ask the question in Spanish, a skill that is essential to foreign language learners. If the question is too difficult for students, they should not be made to feel bad about using English, especially in first year Spanish. Another way of making students feel like their questions are important to us is to allow a couple of minutes at the end of each class for clarifications or questions in English. This validates those students who will simply become mute at times and perhaps will help keep most students on track. Of course, all students should feel welcomed in office hours to discuss their problems. Faculty attitudes can perpetuate an atmosphere of silence which is the result of following a strictly prescriptivist curriculum or they can facilitate a community-based feeling where students are more comfortable speaking or are not terrified to ask a question in English.

To build a truthful relationship with our students, they should not be put on the defensive. No one likes to be put in this situation. Being placed on the spot for a whole semester is counterproductive to learning. The issue of feedback and correction has received much attention over the years in second language acquisition research. Our feedback in class should not make our students look dumb. We should not say direct statements such as “No, where did you come up with that?” It is natural for them to make mistakes in a foreign language, and we need to make sure they know this. In-depth feedback can be given on written work but in a non-threatening manner. Putting students in groups is one way to lower anxiety. Students can discuss their answers and if, in the end, they are incorrect, it is the whole group that is wrong and not the individual thus dissipating the sense of embarrassment.

No matter how much of an equal opportunity community we want to create in our classrooms, we will always be the power

figure simply because we are the professor with the final word and the grade-giver. It is essential that we create a community where faculty and student work together and every voice has a chance to be heard. In other words, we do not want to project ourselves as dictators who are out to flunk or destroy members of our community who do not always conform (i.e., have the correct answer). Our students know we have the ultimate power, but we do not have to flaunt it in front of them. We can be effective leaders without threatening them. Another way we make ourselves seem less dictator-like is moving out from behind the podium or the desk to de-center the class and empower the students. We are less of a figure to be feared if we mingle with our students and participate in their groups. By putting students in groups they also have a sense of collective power and the focus of the course can become more student-centered. Collaboration through group work is indeed a means of building community in our classrooms.

Building Community Through Group Work

The work of human development theorist Lev Vygotsky and his concepts of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development serve as a valid theoretical framework for the adoption of group work as a community building practice. Prawat (1993) noted that Vygotsky emphasized the key role of social relations for all types of complex mental activities. The acquisition of knowledge or skills through collaboration with others is, according to Vygotskian approaches, the most effective way of learning.

If learning occurs as Vygotsky describes, then it is only logical to think that through interaction with others is how we learn best. As teachers we should try to create an environment in which group interactions are at the soul of classroom practices. But if we look at how most

classroom work takes place we will see some, but not much of what Vygotsky suggests. It appears that most teachers are in favor of group work from the theoretical point of view, but when it comes to practice there is a great of reluctance. What could be the basis for faculty to have this attitude toward group work? Is group work harder to control? Do students work or waste time when they are in groups? Do all the students work or does just one do the work while the others do nothing? Do they all like to work in groups?

Prior to analyzing these questions we need to look at what we understand a group to be. A group in the classroom is formed when three or more students decide to work together toward a common goal. As time goes by the group shares experiences, ideas, emotions, and identity as the group slowly develops. A simple rearrangement of furniture or instructing students to “work in groups” will not be sufficient to comply with the above definition of group. More than that is required for a group identity to develop. Along the same lines is the previously mentioned concept of teacher versus student-centered approach. Creating a student-centered environment requires more than moving the chairs in a circle. When responsibility, control, and attention are placed on the students themselves working in groups, then they become the center of the classroom, and they lead the way. The trick or the difficulty lies in creating a content-challenging environment that will promote this behavior as opposed to total classroom chaos.

The sense of belonging to a group not only aids the acquisition process as Vygotsky describes, but also helps in dealing with the high level of anxiety most foreign language learners feel when entering a foreign language classroom. As we mentioned earlier, peer evaluation is sometimes more stressful than evaluation given by the instructor. When their performance is sheltered and supported by a group, it can become a much less stressful

experience. The goal of making their classroom experience more comfortable is not about making things “easier” for students. It is about creating a less threatening environment that will allow the interaction of ideas and negotiation of meaning. This negotiation can only occur when the interaction occurs between peers and not only between teacher and students. When the work students have to produce is the result of a group creation then the tension and responsibility is shared among the group members. It is also widely mentioned how working in groups helps promote a more positive affective climate increasing a student’s motivation to learn. This sheltered environment is extremely helpful for those students who entered the language classroom with fear of opening their mouth.

Other suggestions to help build a comfortable and productive group work environment are the following:

- At the beginning, create activities that are challenging but at the same time reasonable enough for them to gain confidence.
- Address them as a group and although the question may be focused on one individual in particular make it a point that the whole group is there for support and help.
- Promote healthy competition among groups to help build team spirit.

Another common concern about group work among teachers is what happens when one does the work and the others do not do anything. This issue too can be addressed with positive results. Dr. Wienckie (Personal Communication) at the State University of West Georgia outlines how to deal with this situation:

Make the first activity a team building one, an activity that will require little linguistic production but a lot of group coordination. The goal of this first step is to get them acquainted with each other and give them confidence.

If a student is going to be a slacker in a group, he or she will very likely be a slacker when working individually also. But perhaps a group environment serves as a motivating experience for one who would normally be a slacker. This is also concern held by the rest of the group. Is it fair to them to do the work for him/her? This is one thing all of us probably go through with group work assignments. The following is my explanation as to why it is important to do group work:

One important reason for working in groups is that once you go into a job you will likely have to work in teams. The ability to deal with someone who is not doing his or her part is also an ability you have to learn. If you can't find a way of dealing with it then come back to me.

In most cases they can solve the problems on their own. The more responsible we make students for their own learning process and outcomes, the more chances we will have of creating and sustaining a more truthful relationship with them.

While it is definitely important to recognize the research that supports the idea of group work in the classroom, it is probably equally important and useful is a selection of examples that can illustrate what is discussed in theory. The following is a scenario with examples of what can be done to building a learning community in the classroom. We approach our students at the beginning of the semester telling them, of course, about the syllabus. We spend time discussing content and then we go straight to how they will be expected to work. We make it clear that about 50% of their grade will come from work they will produce in groups. Class work will be almost all in groups. So we talk about how to form these groups and we negotiate details to make them comfortable. They have the first week and a half to decide with whom to work. Once the group is set we take pictures of them, they come up with a name for the group, and they all exchange names and

emails to make sure they can contact each other. Then we explain to them that for each project each team member has a role and the roles will have to be rotated every 2 weeks, which corresponds to every project and gives us enough time to see every student performing in each role. The roles are: leader, writer, editor and reporter. In everything they do in groups they are responsible for fulfilling those roles. The first project is for them to get to know each other, learn about the mechanics of working in groups and produce basic sentences about themselves in Spanish. In this first project each student has to talk about who they are, where they are from, what they like to do and something special about them. The leader will time the project, assign tasks and stay on top of the group's production. The writer will collect and put together everyone's information. The editor, of course, edits grammar, content and presentation. Finally, the reporter is the one in charge of presenting it to the class. Expectations, responsibilities, and tasks are specified clearly from the beginning. The reporter is also responsible for emailing us every Friday with brief comments on the group's performance for that week. If there are problems within a group, the reporter will inform us of that. For the next project the roles rotate and it goes on for the rest of the semester. Our experience with this type of approach is far from broad, but still we must say that in the 9 years we have been teaching a foreign language this type of work in groups has been the one with the most positive results.

As Perkins (1991) points out, cooperative learning illustrates distributive intelligence. Perkins defines distributive intelligence, as an accomplishment that is not a function simply of individual capabilities but the product of individuals and tools (such as language) at work, each of which contributes to achieving desired goals. The ability to work in a group to solve problems and develop products is a skill that not all of us have or enjoy. But what

students learn, Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argue, “should not be separated from how they learn it”. Students must come to understand how to transfer knowledge by learning it at the same time they are applying it in meaningful contexts.

In language learning, language is mainly a tool of communication, to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions, etc. Learning a language and applying it at the same time will require almost inevitably the setting up of group interactions in which to practice the skills that are to be acquired. A meaningful language-learning context translates mainly as a context that creates opportunities for students to express themselves with others.

Using Theater to Create Meaningful Learning

One way of achieving meaningful conversation beyond the short dialogs we all have seen in textbooks is by incorporating theater into our classes. Theatrical productions within the context of the foreign language class allow for a culmination of the strategies for productive relationships and truth in community. Building personal relationships is easily effected when working outside of the textbook-based target language exercises. Within the context of a theatrical production, the stressors associated with the words “homework,” “quiz,” “exam,” and “grammar exercise” disappear. The theater terminology brings a new perspective and new attitude toward the activity since it is not “work,” but rather a “play.” It is not focused on the text, although a script is studied. It focuses on the people speaking, moving and inter-acting. The power of the word “play” immediately removes the angst of verb conjugation, assessment and searching for vocabulary. Anxiety may still exist, but it is not for those specifically associated with performance in the language classroom. The concept of memorizing lines and interacting on stage has its own challenges for any student, but they are familiar and tangible, thus more

easily conquered, and specifically not “foreign” to their realm of experience, though the language may be.

A dramatic representation is inherently collaborative. Students rely on the language to communicate in a real-life situation and on the teacher for comprehension of linguistic nuances as well as pronunciation. The collaboration, however, shifts the focus from teacher and student to that of interdependence between students. Students must face each other, know their lines, pronounce them well enough to be understood, relay the appropriate emotion at the right time and be trusted by their fellow actors to rehearse, to prepare and to work together for the finished production.

Successfully learning language in context is difficult at best in the foreign language classroom. Teachers consistently use visual aids to assist their students in learning vocabulary both in writing and for oral production exercises. A play more realistically imitates the relationship of the student and the language. In a play the context is clear but the language is shared as a means of communication between students, rather than between student and teacher, or student and text. Additionally, the scenes in a play offer students a sense of what conversation in the target language feels like. In lieu of the common question/answer exercises in class between teacher and student or between students, this allows for a much broader scope. Cadence of speech, exchange of comments in a natural conversation, and common interjections all appear in stage scripts, and thus accustom the student to realistic speech in every day life. As most actors know, real life situations often lend themselves to use of lines learned in plays. Students acting in foreign language plays also learn expressions, exclamations, and vocabulary to express feelings and comments in given contexts.

Learning a play offers enormous opportunity for contact hours with the target language, both as individual work and as

group work. Individually, students spend time memorizing lines, practicing pronunciation and by the very nature of repetition, they are learning the grammatical structure of the language. This is one particularly effective way to learn the subjunctive with its irregular verb conjugations. In a group rehearsal, students are more likely to help one another with pronunciation, with working out the meaning of words or phrases and with interpretation of delivery. This type of activity leaves the charged atmosphere of classroom assessments and allows for exploration of the language informally, but with much more attention and participation of the student.

Earning trust is very important in theater, but is also a natural outgrowth of the relationship of student and teacher/director. The teacher's role as facilitator of learning continues, but in the mode of directing the student toward successful performance on stage. Oddly enough, since the venue changes from classroom activity to theater—even if it occurs within the same classroom—the students' attitude changes. They see the teacher as director, someone who is guiding them toward a successful performance, not someone who is asking them to perform grammatically in writing. The pressure is not on being correct grammatically and the pressure does not come from the teacher. The pressure to do well comes from within the students themselves, since they associate personally with their success on stage. We frequently have students drop by our offices to run lines, to review pronunciation and to clarify meanings of lines; the visits are always student initiated, a wonderful change from our perspective as a teacher who always asks students to come by for help.

Another aspect of language learning in the theatrical context is that of truth in community. Truth in language learning means, in very simple terms, that it is normal and appropriate to make mistakes. As mentioned previously, students learn to

fear making fools of themselves and they fear failing because the classroom is inherently laced with evaluations and assessments, not to mention comparisons with fellow students. Truth is not only allowed, but is blatantly obvious during rehearsals. During play rehearsals on stage, actors in English make mistakes, mispronounce or misinterpret lines spoken and the reaction is simply to try again as all laugh or groan, but it becomes a collective effort to support one other and to rehearse together. This is true for any theatrical rehearsal with students of a foreign language. The bond that actors form springs directly from the fact that they share a common goal as well as an individual goal. In the foreign language classroom, efforts students make in class are more often than not simply practice for the oral proficiency exam as a solo performance. The symbiotic relationship of foreign language students and theater allows for students to maintain a "real" context and "real" conversation with natural conversational flow. The test for a theatrical play is when the curtain goes up for the performance, but students are still dependent upon each other, much like any participant in a conversation. By then, the students will have worked individually and collectively enough, trust each other enough, and have studied enough so that they can perform as a troupe and as the individual character for a successful performance, which the spectators will both understand and appreciate.

As we have seen, building classroom community begins with us through the efforts we make from the first day of class to bring students of different backgrounds yet similar language learning anxieties together as a group. For foreign language learning to be effective, we must relieve students' anxiety so that they become risk-takers in the production of language. Group work effectively lowers individual anxiety levels by becoming a cooperative effort as well as each individual having a role within the group. One way of exemplifying the

community that we have created in our classrooms is through a theatrical production where each student must work individually and collectively for the success of the whole play. Through group work and theater, both communication and community are practiced. We are helping our students to be more successful by providing them opportunities in the classroom that mimic both language skills used in everyday conversational interactions and life skills through preparing them to work with members of other communities in which they will be a member.

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