



Foreign Language Module
Designing Inclusive Group Work

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Few language teachers would dispute the importance of group work in their classroom. In fact, the goal of language instruction – enabling students to communicate in the target language – absolutely requires that they work with others in order to develop speaking and listening proficiency. These activities occupy a large portion of the lesson time in many classrooms. It stands to reason, then, that an instructor should cultivate a greater awareness of the barriers some students face when attempting them, and should seek to make group work as inclusive as possible.

Before delving into an exploration of the barriers to effective group work and how to deal with them, though, it would make sense to define the term “group work” for our purposes. Here the term will be used to describe any activity in the classroom involving multiple students: it may involve groups of two or six; it may be a five-minute warm-up or a highly structured multiple-day project; it may be non-graded or graded. Some examples include word-guessing games, role-plays, guided conversations, skits, and group presentations.

The advantages of group work are numerous. The primary advantage, of course, is that group work provides a non-threatening context for practice. Most students would agree that it is less stressful to practice with one or a few peers than it is to speak in front of the entire class and teacher. As one student puts it, “It’s not as demanding... I don’t feel like I have someone looking over my shoulder critiquing me on how well I’m speaking” (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). Collaborative activities allow individuals to benefit from the strengths of others, as another student comments: “Group projects are nice because you are not the only one thinking about something. You have different ideas and different creativities coming out” (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). Other advantages to group activities include their flexibility and the ease with which they can be adapted to handle limitations on time and space.

Possible Barriers to Effective Group Work

In spite of the advantages, however, any barriers that a student may encounter in the language classroom could potentially come up in group work. General barriers affect all students: for instance, if the classroom atmosphere is negative or threatening, students will be less forthcoming with their peers and will benefit less from activities. Poor design and/or presentation of the activities themselves will also reduce their effectiveness. It is up to the instructor to ensure that these barriers do not become an issue. Instructors should establish a welcoming, inclusive classroom that makes all students feel comfortable expressing themselves, and should prepare activities with forethought, including the giving of clear and easily understandable instructions.

While in the ideal language classroom all of the students have approximately the same level of background experience in the target language, difference in background and preparation may be a barrier in some cases. Fortunately, group work by nature can be a good way of mitigating this – students with a less extensive background profit from working with others who have spent more time learning the target language, and students who have more developed skills reinforce them by sharing them.

Less conspicuous barriers include classroom activities that, while not poorly designed, fail to anticipate differences among students. Such activities may be designed with a requirement for eyesight, mobility, or some other physical factor. They may also be designed around the assumption that all students have similar social skills, or similar native language abilities in listening comprehension, reading skills, writing, or articulation. Given the diversity of today's college students, these assumptions have the potential to cause barriers for a variety of learners, and teachers should always evaluate their lesson plans in light of the needs of their particular students. Certain students may have a history of a particular disability and be accustomed to requesting accommodation, but official accommodations are often limited to assessment; other students may not have official support from the school's disability services office, and still others may not have a diagnosed disability but still have difficulty with certain aspects of language learning. It is therefore important that the instructor particularly consider how the everyday activities of the classroom can be adapted to be made more accessible.

Case Studies: Overcoming Barriers

The Universal Design approach to classroom design seeks to anticipate student diversity and make course materials as inclusive as possible, thereby benefiting not only individuals with disabilities but the class as a whole. There are many ways to modify group work activities to increase their accessibility. Here we will examine a few sample activities which are typical of the communicative foreign language classroom, identifying the barriers they might present to students and suggesting several ways in which they might be modified.

Activity 1: Role-play Conversation

Description: Students work in groups of three to role-play a visit to the doctor. Each student receives a prompt in the target language explaining their role in the conversation: that of the sick child, the child's parent, or the doctor. The prompt also indicates grammar and vocabulary which should be used in the conversation. Students are given approximately five minutes to read and follow the instructions by having a spontaneous conversation.

Possible barriers: A student with a disability affecting processing speed or reading comprehension may well have trouble with the format in which the instructions are presented. All language teachers have been in the situation of ending a timed activity and discovering that one group has not finished reading the instructions!

Possible strategies for modification: Contextualizing the instructions will aid all students. This can be done by showing the class a picture of a child and parent in a doctor's office and asking questions which elicit grammar and vocabulary that would likely be used in that situation (who are they? what are they doing? etc.). Give the prompt orally in addition to providing it in written form. By giving the instructions in a variety of formats, comprehension of the activity becomes much simpler and students can use the entire five minutes to speak.

Activity 2: Skit

Description: Students work in groups of four to prepare and present a brief skit using vocabulary and grammar from the chapter being studied, and are graded on grammar and vocabulary usage as well as pronunciation. They are given one class period to work and skits are presented at the end of the period.

Possible barriers: The short time allowed for this project presents a problem for any student who needs extra time for processing or writing. That student may be "left behind" as their faster group members work ahead, and end up reading off of another's paper when the skit is presented. While this may not affect the student's grade, he/she has received few of the benefits of this type of activity (working out how to use grammar and vocabulary correctly in sentences within the context of a larger discussion). Students who have trouble with reading or articulation will also find this project stressful – the former because it must be read in front of the class, the latter because of the pronunciation portion of the grade.

Possible strategies for modification: Simply allowing more time for this project will reduce or eliminate many of the barriers it presents as a one-class activity. If students are to present at the beginning of the next period, they have the opportunity to gather outside

of class, take extra time, and use resources if necessary (for instance, the student who takes longer to write may prefer to use a computer). The student who has difficulty reading has the opportunity to memorize his/her part or practice cues. In the case of the student with articulation difficulties, it may be appropriate here to adjust the requirements of the project; for instance, that student could turn in a written script of his/her part and be graded on correctness of spelling and accentuation in place of the pronunciation grade.

Activity 3: Grammar Practice Mingling Activity

Description: Students are given a sheet of paper with a list of infinitive verb phrases, all relating to activities which students could have done in the last week (eat a hamburger, go to the library, etc.). They must conjugate the verbs in the past tense to ask their peers what they did during the week, writing down the names of whoever can answer the question in the affirmative. The first person to complete the sheet with all different names “wins.” Instructions are given orally as well as written on the sheet in the target language.

Possible barriers: Students with a disability affecting oral and/or reading comprehension may need more time than is usually given to process the fairly complex instructions to this activity, and students who have difficulty with verb conjugations and similar pattern exercises will find the activity itself more challenging than the teacher intends. Because the activity involves getting up and mingling with classmates, any student who has a physical disability (or injury) impeding mobility will be at a disadvantage. A student with social difficulties, or even a student who is extremely shy, may also have difficulty with this activity, since it requires initiating conversations with other classmates.

Possible strategies for modification: In addition to giving the instructions slowly and clearly, modeling the ideal exchange, with correctly conjugated verb in question and answer, will help students see what the activity requires. Conjugate (or have students conjugate) several verbs in the correct tense and form before starting the exercise, and write them on the board for the benefit of visual learners. It is also possible to structure this activity in a way that will aid students with mobility or social issues: divide the class into two lines; one line will not move, but the other will move down one person every two or three minutes, so that students are constantly talking to new partners. This negates the need for movement from a student with physical difficulties, and takes away the initiation aspect of the activity for any student who might have trouble approaching and starting conversations with others.

A Note on Forming Groups

Given the differing ability levels and preparation of students, as well as social dynamics, it makes sense that who students work with can affect their performance on an activity as well as their enjoyment of and willingness to contribute. Pairs or groups may be formed at random, or the instructor may group students according to grade (high grades paired with high grades, or high grades paired with low grades) or according to another factor (alphabetical order, seating arrangement in the classroom, etc.), or allow students to choose their own groups.

Clearly, there is no right or wrong method of group formation; all have their own advantages and disadvantages, and these as well as other factors should be considered. For instance, many students enjoy choosing their own partners, but a student with a social difficulty may have trouble with this and benefit from having a partner assigned (of course, that same student might benefit greatly from working with a partner with whom he/she feels comfortable). Pairing students by grade can mean that certain groups require extra time or support, but may give some students a needed opportunity to work through material themselves at their own pace and get extra support from the instructor. Many teachers prefer to use a variety of methods of group formation so that students are constantly working with new partners of differing abilities. The nature of the activity itself may also affect how groups are formed; for a five-minute warmup it may be appropriate to let students work with those around them, but for a multi-day graded project a more thoughtful grouping may benefit students. Instructors should therefore consider the nature of the activity as well as the needs of their particular students as they are planning how to form groups.

On a side note, teachers should also think carefully about how to grade group projects, when grades are to be assigned. Group grades can be a tremendous source of stress both to students who are concerned that another's lack of preparation will affect them negatively and to students who are anxious that their own abilities do not measure up to other group members'. Basing a portion of the overall grade on an individual's performance or production can help to alleviate this, as students have control over part of their grade regardless of what their group members do. This portion of the grade could be a participation/effort grade assigned by the professor or other group members, or it could be based on the individual's performance in a skit or presentation. It is impossible to entirely separate an individual's work from the group's, and each individual should indeed take responsibility for the group's production as a whole, but the instructor should certainly consider how group projects can be graded fairly based on the differing abilities and personalities of each particular class.

Summary

The diversity of needs in the foreign language classroom requires that group work, which is such an important part of learning another language, be made as accessible as possible to every student in the class. There are many methods of increasing accessibility; Teresa Cabal Krastel

(2008) lists the most salient as “maximizing multiple learning modalities, accessing meaning through students’ background knowledge, and organizing tasks as a series of manageable steps” (p. 89). The case studies above have suggested ways to incorporate these strategies into some typical group activities, and hopefully can also serve as a model for instructors who are looking to modify their course materials to better serve the needs of their classes. Fortunately, group work is infinitely adaptable, and by making small changes it is easy to increase its inclusiveness and thus its effectiveness for all students.

References

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