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Using Professional Presentations to Improve Cross-Cultural Communication

In this article, I explain how I used my interdisciplinary expertise in a TESOL classroom. The class consisted of 24 high-intermediate students ages 25 to 35, with a 65/35% male-to-female ratio. Of the students, 75% were Spanish speaking, while the remainder consisted of Farsi, Arabic, Hindi, Russian, Mandarin, Korean, and German speakers. The class met at a Bay Area adult school 4 nights a week with an optional Saturday class. To achieve authentic cross-cultural communication, I used cooperative learning (CL) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The results showed that students gained cross-cultural awareness, improved computer skills, and developed authentic speaking skills.

My Inspiration for Applying My Previous Experience

After spending several years delivering professional presentations in a variety of business settings, along with effective use of digital media, I have been inspired to bring these skills into my adult ESL classrooms. In my professional experience, I have observed the challenges facing ESL/ELLs because of their lack of language ability, cultural knowledge, and current computer skills. Furthermore, for these students to succeed in the workplace, they need to be able to collaborate in groups with people from different backgrounds. According to former Lockheed Martin CEO Norman Augustin: “Most innovations today involve large teams of people. ... We have to emphasize communication skills, the ability to work in teams and with people from different cultures” (Wallis & Stepton, 2006).

Like the innovations today to which Augustin refers, my adult ESL class was composed of a large, diverse group of individuals. By incorporating my previous professional experience and digital-presentation skills into the ESL classroom, I was able to not only empower my students to share and appreciate their diversity in the classroom, but also to increase my students’ English skills, cultural awareness,

and technology use. By focusing on my students' enjoyment of sharing their unique family histories and customs, I was able to tap into their interest to learn. I decided to capitalize on their desire to share about their lives by writing an ESL unit around this topic—sharing about one's life and culture—while also integrating my professional knowledge of public speaking and presenting. The goal of my class was to increase my students' language skills and cross-cultural awareness through the use of cooperative learning (CL) and computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The practical implementation of this goal was through collaborating in groups to prepare and present professional presentations that incorporated digital media.

Achieving Cross-Cultural Communication Through CL and CALL

Cross-cultural communication is essential in a globalized economy, society, and learning environment. The ability to take on another person's perspective and understand a different culture is an important skill. Cross-cultural communication has been advanced by Tannen (1984) and can be identified by eight criteria:

1. When to talk;
2. What to say;
3. Pacing and pausing;
4. The art of listening;
5. Intonation;
6. What is not in a language;
7. Degree of indirectness; and
8. Cohesion and coherence.

Cultural communication also incorporates other aspects: music, dance, food, religion, and hobbies. To achieve authentic cross-cultural communication, I used two methods: cooperative learning and computer-assisted language learning.

Cooperative learning is just one branch of cross-cultural communication endorsed by Slavin et al. (1996), assessing the value of group work in classrooms for intellectually demanding, creative, open-ended, and higher-order thinking tasks. The key concepts of CL are learning through positive interdependence and peer teaching, along with developing higher-order thinking. The conclusion of CL is that when the group succeeds, everyone succeeds. I promoted cooperative learning in my classroom through group work and peer constructive feedback as we created professional presentations.

Computer-assisted language learning was a natural fit for incorporating professional presentations in the classroom. According to

Egbert (2005), CALL is defined as “using computers to support language teaching and learning in some way” (p. 3). Teaching students basic computer skills increases their prospects for employment in the workforce, and using technology to support their language learning prepares them for both local and international business. We had a computer lab next to our classroom that I used to allow students to create digital content for presentations. The computers had simple authoring programs that allowed students to draw pictures, import graphics and photos, and download information and assignments from the Internet. To promote cross-cultural communication, I encouraged my students to collaborate with each other in the classroom by working in groups and providing constructive feedback, as well as creating an individual professional presentation using digital media.

Digital Presentations in the Adult ESL Classroom

The class population of 24 high-intermediate students was 65% male and 35% female, ages 25-35. Of the students, 75% were Spanish speaking, and the remainder included speakers of Farsi, Arabic, Hindi, Russian, Mandarin, Korean, and German. They met four nights a week for three hours at a Bay Area adult school, plus in an optional 9 a.m.-noon Saturday class. Students took the class for a variety of reasons, including job advancement, college enrollment, and community advocacy. The goals for my students were to:

1. Work successfully in a group setting;
2. Organize and present a professional presentation;
3. Give polite constructive feedback;
4. Improve use of basic computer functions; and
5. Demonstrate improved cross-cultural communication.

On the first day of class, I purposely sought to create an environment conducive to cross-cultural communication through cooperative learning. After an icebreaker to introduce the class, I enthusiastically set the stage for a safe, respectful, and inclusive space by reminding them of a few things. First, I encouraged them to relax and have fun in our class. I explained that the class was for their benefit. I emphasized that there is no such thing as a “dumb” question—just questions. Furthermore, I intentionally used a “jigsaw” method of grouping students so that each individual had the opportunity to interact and learn from every other student in the class. Creating a welcoming classroom environment with inclusive norms and groups that facilitate the exchange of ideas promotes passion and creativity. I have found that students are motivated and strengthened when they work as a community of learners.

The next day, I introduced the goal of organizing and delivering an authentic professional presentation. We reviewed the presentation rubric, which allowed them to make a paper portfolio, PowerPoint presentation, or notes. I also provided them a list of trustworthy websites to access in order to research their culture, with each group working as a team to support and assist one another in research. The class was divided into six groups of students who were at varied levels of English proficiency and computer skills and with different language backgrounds. For the next class, the students researched for their presentations in groups as I went around the computer lab, listened to students' ideas, and offered assistance if asked. I also distributed, explained, and modeled how to prepare a presentation handout, followed by leading a question-and-answer time.

To help students learn to give polite constructive feedback, we focused on constructive feedback skills, using a handout with models and explanations. This time was also followed by a question-and-answer period. On the next day, students began to give their cultural presentations in their small groups, delivering constructive feedback to each other, and incorporating revisions into their presentations. This step allowed them to give and receive feedback as well as to practice presenting in a smaller group before they presented to the entire class.

The small-group presentations were followed by two days of class presentations. For the first day of presentations, half the class delivered their professional presentations, and the students gave constructive feedback. On the next day, the rest of the class gave their presentations, and the other students also followed up with feedback. For the final day of class, we had a class celebration in which students brought their favorite food and music to share with their peers.

Results and Discussion

Through cooperative learning and computer-assisted language learning, we were able to witness increased cross-cultural communication. Students were able to work collaboratively, give constructive feedback, use technology more effectively, and deliver professional presentations.

One of the effective outcomes of cross-cultural communication was the students' sharing their culture with each other in small groups. During the small-group multicultural discussions in class, students exchanged information about various aspects of their culture: education, dating/marriage, parent/child relationships, food and cuisine, and leisure activities, to name a few. In this way, students were able to learn about the various countries from the "original sources" of their fellow students. As they shared and exchanged information

about their culture, I frequently heard their peers comment “*interesting*” and “*I didn’t know that.*” Additionally, students were receptive to each other’s presentations. For example, one student prepared and delivered an informative digital presentation that was well received by his classmates, the topic being the culture, history, and religious background of his native country, Turkey.

By applying my experience in delivering professional presentations, I was able to empower students and prepare them for language use in business settings. One of the students in my class was interested in running for school president. However, he lacked oral presentation skills and did not know how to create fliers for campaigning. During our class, he obtained the necessary presentation and computer skills to campaign for school president, and he gained sufficient self-confidence to go to each classroom to give a short presentation. These classroom presentations were followed by a larger presentation in front of the entire school. The students in his class also collaborated to create a flier for their presidential candidate, which they distributed around school and at the oral presentations. After working diligently and delivering his presentations, this student won the election! Everyone was very proud of this immigrant student who had formerly lacked self-confidence, yet who was able to improve his language and communication skills to be elected school president. His experience set an example to other students of what they could accomplish.

Conclusion

This adult ESL unit provided opportunities for students to enhance their collaborative and constructive feedback skills, improve their use of digital technology, increase their cultural knowledge, and practice delivering professional content. Their cross-cultural communication was encouraged through cooperative learning and computer-assisted language learning. Further investigations should be completed to examine student development of higher-order thinking, teamwork, and cultural appreciation.

Author

Victoria Moran Vozza, a native of San Francisco, graduated in 2001 from the University of San Francisco and earned her MA TESOL in 2014. She has more than 15 years of experience teaching in the Bay Area. She has been part of the University of San Francisco Board of Directors, served as the executive director of the Edward Patrick Moran Foundation, and participated as a board member of USF’s Peninsula-Silicon Valley Regional Council. An avid tennis player, she has also served as a board member of the Palo Alto Tennis Club.

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