How Can Teachers Use Research Projects as a Means to Enhance Student Knowledge of the Hispanic World and to Foster in Them an Interest in Learning Language?

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Submitted June 2001

Introduction

While traveling on administrative leave to Orlando, a lady sitting next to me told me that she had a ninth-grade daughter who was taking Spanish as a second language. As soon as she knew that I was a language teacher she said, “That is great. Last year my daughter’s Spanish class had 3 projects about Latin American countries. She learned a lot from her research. Now she wants us to pay for her trip to Costa Rica, the country she worked on. Since then, she is very excited to learn more about it…I think that language teachers should include more cultural aspects in their courses…”

The lady’s suggestion is something I have been thinking about on several occasions. Yet during my several years of teaching Spanish in Africa and in the United States, my colleagues and I have been constantly asked many questions about Spanish culture. In both private and public schools students asked questions like:

- Why do I have to learn Spanish?
- What do Latin American students do for fun?
- Up to what age is school mandatory?
- Do Latin American students work during summer vacation?
- Why do people use different words to designate the same thing from one country to another?

In this variety of questions, one can see a noticeable desire to learn more about Latin American culture. Usually many of these questions are largely answered in class. However as an educator, I thought that students would learn with more enthusiasm if I focused more on the culture while increasing their participation through research projects. Because language is the expression of culture, and culture is the representation of how society functions at any given time, I do believe that culture needs to be closely linked with language in the process of learning.

Thus, with the students’ questions in mind, I came up with some relevant topics about Latin America and Spain. I selected the ones that I thought would be of interest to the students and that would provoke their curiosity. Among the topics I chose were Tourism, Education, and Sports. These themes turned out to be the students’ favorite topics of research.
Methodology

The main purpose of the research projects was to motivate students in order for them to learn the language with enthusiasm. To reach my goals, I followed 5 different steps that I clearly explained to them before they started working on the task.

**Step 1: Selection of Topics by Students.** Because each presentation includes 2 topics, rather than working individually I decided to have at least 2 students per group with the expectation that each group member would do his best for the success of the task. The countries were selected according to their importance and the students' interest: Argentina was selected because of its famous soccer and tennis players such as Diego Armando Maradona and Gabriela Sabatini. Colombia was pointed out for its Plaza Bolivar and the Gold Museum that contains over 100,000 pre-Colombian artwork, Chile for its beautiful ski resorts, El Perú for the Machu Pichu site, while Mexico came up for being a neighbor of the U.S.

The students really liked this step since they freely selected their partners, the country, and the topic they wanted to work on. The idea of choosing freely the area of research was a final touch to start up the motivation and the enthusiasm I expected them to show. Yet it was a sort of commitment to an excellent presentation that encouraged them to look for good and reliable sources.

**Step 2: Resources.** Our first destination was the school library. A week before students reported to the library I met with librarians to choose and to organize the materials the students would need to accomplish the task. After finding the materials about Latin America and Spain, we classified them by country and topic. That way when students came in, the librarian could explain to them how to use the resources and they could start working immediately without wasting time. During their first visit to the library, students usually found out that the teacher was very organized and very thorough about the projects. Therefore they were implicitly encouraged to work diligently and conscientiously.

In addition to that, many students went to local libraries for supplementary resources while others, the computer lovers, used the Internet to gather more information. Moreover, some parents helped their children by providing them with very useful resources from their office or their workplace. Finally, many of the students usually had an interview with me during the Flex periods (period that lasts approximately 40 minutes and scheduled to review the previous lessons and to give extra help to students who are in need), especially to talk about sports, tourism, and traveling.

**Step 3: Writing the Project.** Each student was encouraged to work on the project at home. However, after gathering the materials they needed, they spent the Flex periods to write their paper. Because my main goal was to deepen the students’ cultural knowledge, I was very flexible about the language they wrote in. Some chose to write in English while others decided to write in Spanish. In
fact in level 2, students were always allowed to answer the cultural knowledge questions in English during the chapter tests. However, I encouraged them to use the Spanish language with my substantial assistance. Dictionaries, textbooks, and any kind of useful materials were allowed in order to facilitate the work. We must keep in mind that if students do not feel comfortable when preparing the projects, they will automatically lose interest and enthusiasm and the teacher’s goal will be jeopardized.

**Step 4: Presentation.** The students had 3 weeks to prepare the project and 15 to 18 minutes to present it. The presentation included 2 or 3 different sections, the third being optional:

a. **General presentation of the project.** That is a detailed presentation of the written part of the project. They are expected to show a thorough preparation and ability to talk about their topic.

b. **Presentation of the posters.** The posters must be a sort of evidence of what was said in the general presentation and also an extra contribution to support the whole project.

c. **Explanation of the recipe of the dishes and tasting.** Here is the time to socialize and to ask questions about typical food. Any group who has part c is entitled to 7 minutes extra.

Usually it is hard to have the entire class focus on students’ presentations. For that reason, I came up with a way that I thought could remedy that tendency. During the presentation, I asked the rest of the class to write down at least 7 different points they learned because the following week they would have a quiz about what they remember from the projects. With such a technique, the whole class is so attentive that at the end of each presentation the students are able to ask relevant questions.

**Step 5: Assessment of the project.** The assessment was based on the following criteria:

a. **Task completion:** Did the group come up with relevant information that helps the class learn about the country? They were supposed to talk about what is very typical to the country, what is so attractive in the country, what is so different from their own culture etc…

b. **Length of the assignment:** If prepared as requested, the presentation should take at least 13 minutes. Any presentation that lasts less than 9 minutes is considered unsatisfactory because all the topics offer a wide range of information to share with the class.
c. Enthusiasm and conviction to talk about the topic: During the phase of preparation, students were told to be enthusiastic, lively, and convincing when presenting their project. Thus, any presentation that is a simple reading of the paper is considered unsatisfactory.

d. Ability to answer reasonable questions asked by classmates. I tried to prevent students from asking tricky questions they might ask to embarrass the presenting group.

e. The use of Spanish is a plus for the group. Demonstration of an oral proficiency in the target language is strongly recommended.

f. Each member of the group is evaluated during the presentation according to his or her performance. That way they are all motivated to do their best. No one counts on his or her partner to get a good grade. The one who tries to use Spanish as much as possible and to demonstrate his/her oral proficiency in Spanish is highly rewarded.

Impact on and Feedback from Students

Although the projects did not answer all the questions and the interrogations students usually have, they did help to broaden and to deepen their knowledge of the Hispanic world. The majority of the presentations were very beneficial. As examples, they mentioned the two most famous parks of Chile (El Parque Nacional Lauca y Nahuelbuta) and the beautiful ski resorts in Portilla. The Galapagos Islands in Ecuador and the Tango of Argentina were largely presented. Talking about the tango, one group explained the following: “The tango was originated from brothels in Buenos Aires and influenced by African dance. At first, the upper classes shunned the dance. Then the French adopted it and made the tango a sophisticated dance. The lyrics speak of lost love and ruined lives. They feel very melancholic. The most famous tango composer and singer was Carlos Gardel”. Moreover, students learned that Colombians rarely drink alcohol with meals. They prefer having Gaseosa, a non-alcoholic carbonated drink etc…

All the students who participated in the projects (127 in total) were very satisfied and they expressed a strong desire to have these kinds of assignments very often.

At the end of the cycle of the presentations, I decided to seek feedback from the students. Here are some of their opinions:
1. “I think doing research projects like the one we just did lets us learn better and more. If we are having fun doing a project, more people will do a better job. I think this was a very productive assignment and we learned a lot about our own countries and everybody else’s.” [a female from the U.S.]

2. “The project allowed us to learn about other cultures and it broadened our view of the world. I think a similar project would help us learn even more.” [a male from the U.S.]

3. “This project was a lot of work, but at the end it was worth it. I loved listening to people’s presentations. Now I know where I want to go for the summer. Thanks guys.” [a female from Iran]

4. “Projects are a way we can learn without having someone to tell us what we are learning. It’s more hands-on and when we have a project we are excited to finish and learn more.” [anonymous]

5. “I like doing this project because I learn a lot about my country and a lot about some other Latin American countries. We should do this type of activity or project more often. It makes the kids pay more attention too, since it is an easy grade.” [a Lebanese-American female]

6. “I enjoyed doing this project because I learned how Latin American people lived and what they do. I learned about the education of Latin American countries, I learned tourism and the sports they play. It was fun doing this project. I think we should do projects with partners because it is more fun.” [a male from Thailand]

7. “I learned a lot about all the countries in Latin America. I think we should do these types of things more often. Everybody paid attention and got something out of it. I think that the next time we should have better preparation. Overall I liked it and I want to do it again.” [a female from the U.S.]

8. “I enjoyed the project because I was able to learn a lot about the country where I was born and about other Latin American countries.” [a female from Colombia]

9. “It was good to learn about the countries we are learning the language. It was fun. I learned more and better when it’s fun. We should do more.” [a female from Greece]

10. “Projects are more hands-on. When we can move around, we get things done. We think it is more fun, so we learn more.” [anonymous]
Samples of posters to support the presentations

The poster of Argentina shows the soccer star Diego Armando Maradona during a game with Nigeria for the 1994 world cup and the famous tennis player Gabriela Sabatini. It also shows the legendary Avenida de Mayo where thousands of mothers used to march to protest against the dictatorship in the years seventies. La Milonga version of tango is being performed by a skillful
Conclusion

The new generation of students we are educating tends to like having fun and to socialize when learning. Therefore as educators, our task must consist of modifying constantly our teaching style and the strategies we use in the classroom and adapt them to the changing realities we are dealing with. Our priorities should be activities that allow students “to have fun” when learning. Feedback numbers 4, 6, 9, and 10 are a sort of invitation kids are sending us to help them achieve better at school. Nevertheless, teachers need to be thorough and consistent when pacing their course, organized and clear about the different activities, and firm and reasonable in their expectations. Yet kids learn better in a very relaxed atmosphere where they do not always feel the teacher controlling them. All they need is our supportive guidance. If we do so, they will learn with more enthusiasm.