

Language Use in the Context of Language Exchange Projects

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Q: Is it important for teachers to reach a preliminary agreement with regard to language use during exchange projects?

A: Teachers do have to think about how they are going to organize language use during exchange projects, whether these take the form of a one-day meeting, distance activities or a language camp. They have to weigh things in advance and agree upon a language management procedure for the activities. I suggest that they discuss these matters together when the time comes to organize the meeting. When the meeting begins to take shape, it is in their interest to determine when to use English, when to use French and when to use a combination of both. They even have to decide which language will be used at mealtimes. In other words, teachers have to take all aspects into consideration, including their groups' second language competency level, which in all likelihood is not the same for all students.

Q: What is the best combination of French and English during exchanges?

A: In my opinion, it is better to plan short activities and switch languages for each one. Using a single language over an extended period—the morning in English, the afternoon in French, for example—runs the risk of tiring out students who have to use their second language, especially since their competency level in that language is probably low. I would suggest that teachers review their planning and alternate language use more or less evenly in, say, 30-minute segments. I would also suggest that they make time during the meeting for all students to use their own languages, for what is called passive bilingualism. At such times, each student hears the students in the other group express themselves naturally in their first language, and vice versa. It's a matter of allowing for a brief respite in the attempt to learn a second language, and of providing an opportunity for students to be exposed to their target language as it is used by native speakers.

Q: Do the teachers have to translate instructions, either before or during the activities?

A: The question of translating instructions often comes up in the teaching of second languages, especially among teachers who are just embarking on their careers. They ask: "Do I have to translate everything, or just the instructions, to make sure that the students understand?" Specialists in second language teaching discourage the use of translation, since the goal is to experience real communication needs, even between teachers and students. There must be a real need to understand what is being said.

Teachers sometimes have to “negotiate” instructions, i.e. ensure that the students have understood by asking them to repeat what they heard. Students are asked, “Can you tell me what you have to do?” There is another reason why teachers are encouraged to avoid translating instructions: if students know that the teacher is going to tell them what they have to do only in their second language, then they will make an effort to understand; if, on the other hand, they are aware that the teacher will also be giving the instructions in their native language, they won’t try to understand, but will simply wait for the second version without really listening the first time around. If I were organizing such a meeting, I’d say, “This activity will take place in English, and the next one in French.” During the first activity, all communication would be English, while French would be used exclusively in the second activity. In other words, there would be no translating involved.

Q: How does one manage the inequality of language competency between groups and between individual students?

A: The inequality of language competency between groups, and even between students of the same group, is a key issue in language exchanges. It is highly likely that there will be inequalities. For this reason, teachers must consider their students’ competency level in their second language, and discuss this between themselves when organizing meetings or even distance exchanges. Take, for example, the case of an exchange between an English school class with a high competency level in French, and a French school class with a lower competency level in English. In such circumstances, I would suggest that the teachers give the students from the English school a little more responsibility to start off the day’s meeting. I might even present them with a few more challenges when the time came to speak in their second language. Then I might consider an activity in English that would constitute a challenge for the students from the French school, but that would in fact be less difficult than the one conducted in French. The activity would also be easier—but not so much that the students would notice—so that the students from the French school could carry it out successfully in their second language and thereby feel validated. All the students would thus feel that they succeeded in what they had to do.

Q: What things should teachers consider in order to optimize language learning during the exchanges?

A: Teachers should reflect together on the climate they wish to create during meetings. The ideal climate is one in which young people can feel at ease taking risks in their second language, and in meeting new people. Teachers might want to consider activities that encourage curiosity and the desire to get to know other people, tasks that are motivating and that engage students to the point where they forget their embarrassment. Thus there is every reason to give as much thought to the climate one wishes to create during the meeting as to language use and content. All these decisions make for a more productive meeting for students and teachers alike.

In my opinion, teachers' attitudes can go a long way toward creating a climate conducive to learning. If they themselves are enthusiastic, if they "embark" on this adventure, the students are likely to do so too.

The choice of activity is also important. One must not be afraid of the playful and agreeable side of learning a second language, of the experience of spending an extraordinary day meeting other students and taking part in inspiring activities. That is why it is essential to think about the activities, to choose those that are inspiring and please young people, pique their curiosity and make them want to participate. The task-oriented approach advocates building around a real need for participation and involvement. There is every reason to make abundant use of role play, gaming activities, songs and periods of relaxation (which are just as important as "real" work), and to integrate these into the activities of the day or meeting. I think that, in this way, the experience will have a positive impact on students' lives.

Q: What conditions must teachers create in order to make the most of exchanges?

A: To make the most of exchanges, students can be prepared beforehand. This can be done by using very simple strategies such as having them reflect on what to do when they don't understand another person, what to do when they don't know a particular word, and what sorts of things they can do as people who want to communicate, but don't have the words they need to do so. I would spend some time with my students going over strategies and brief sentences such as: "Could you please repeat what you said, I didn't understand it;" "I don't know that word; How do you say . . ." It is a matter, therefore, of providing students with simple sentences and strategies that will help them manage interaction in their second language, when they may not have the tools they would have if they were working in their mother tongue.

Q: Is it preferable to correct mistakes as they are made?

A: The correction of mistakes is an important point. Once again, this should be considered and discussed with the other teacher. I think that many second language teachers have already thought about when and how to correct mistakes. In my opinion, it is better not to correct oral mistakes during the meetings. The goal is to encourage the students to communicate: by correcting mistakes the most you will succeed in doing is embarrass the students and interrupt communication. On the other hand, mistakes can be corrected in activities prior to the meetings, for example, when preparing a written description of the school, neighbourhood or the students themselves for the other group. And the same holds for activities after meetings. There, too, I would feel comfortable drawing attention to mistakes and suggesting improvements.