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The Incorporation of Current Events in the Language Classroom and Its Pedagogical Importance

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Abstract

Discussing current events and issues in your foreign language classroom can be an incredibly engaging, motivating, valuable and rewarding part of your curriculum. Staying up to date with current events is vital for personal development and it allows one to have a broader understanding of the universe around us. A new language learner usually focuses on textbooks, grammar structures and the completion of controlled homework assignments. Integrating current events and issues into your language teaching curriculum provides the learner the opportunity to expand both topical and critical thinking vocabulary, practice self-expression and develop debate strategies and techniques. It focuses on local, national and global issues that affect students' everyday lives such as politics, economics, medicine, technology, violation of human rights and the environment ... just to name a few. Researching, analyzing current events not only fosters critical thinking, an important element that unfortunately has faded away in our current society due to the excessive use and dependency of technology; but also, it allows the students to make real world connections. In closing, it is the aim of this study to share with the audience of how to combine face-to-face instruction with on-line learning components which encompass the following: active blended and collaborative learning; design thinking process; enhancement of critical thinking and problem solving; formation of flipped classroom through digital media outside of the classroom and problem-based learning (PBL) where students learn solving real world problems.

Keywords

Participatory Learning, Collaborative Learning, Critical Thinking, Media Literacy, Real World Connections

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Introduction

In accordance with April Chamberlain, "Education is evolving due to the impact of the Internet. We cannot teach our students in the manner in which we were taught". Keeping our students well informed about the world around them is an important part of teaching especially in the foreign language classroom where a learner is in a new language environment. A new language learner usually focuses on textbooks, grammar structures and the completion of controlled homework assignments and exams. Integrating current events into your language teaching curriculum provides the learner the opportunity to expand topical vocabulary, cultivate critical thinking skills, practice of self-expression and develop debate strategies and techniques in the target language. It is an incredibly innovating, engaging, motivating, valuable and rewarding part of your curriculum because it allows students not only to have a broader understanding of the universe that surrounds them but also express their thoughts, ideas and points of view in the target language. In contrast to conventional teaching practices which mainly measures student success by the amount of knowledge taught, the discussion of current events measures how affectively students internalize and produce the knowledge acquired in class in the discussion of issues that affect their everyday lives such as the economy, politics, technology, medicine, human rights, the environment ... just to name a few. As an educator of higher education, I took it upon myself to explore an innovative teaching strategy which would foster active learning, student engagement and critical thinking in my classrooms. To attain this goal, I have been integrating current events and issues into my language teaching curriculum as a tool in order for my students to make real world connections, develop critical thinking skills, enhance media literacy and global awareness and to be surrounded in an environment that encompasses teamwork and exchange of critical and innovative ideas.

Strategies for Teaching Current Events in the Foreign Language Classroom:

Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom approach of teaching distances itself from the traditional model where class time is designated for the discussion and application of the information that students prepare in advance outside of the classroom. For the purposes of the discussion of current events, students could be divided in three groups. The first group is responsible to research and to bring in local events that took place during the week. The second group will focus on national news and, the third, will prepare events on the international level. This approach improves student's reading comprehension skills and allows the student to enrich his/her vocabulary, an essential element to improve reading, writing, listening and writing skills in the language being acquired.

Creating Podcasts

Students can create their podcast based on what they read or hear from news stories. By doing so, it gives them a sense of ownership because it is something that they have created in which they have their own thoughts and perspectives.

Active Learning

Deviates from passive learning to promote student engagement, active participation and deeper understanding of the target language being taught. Using the active learning model, each group reporting on local, national and international presents its finding to the rest of the class which is a valuable tool not only for speaking but also for listening comprehension development in the target language.

Collaborative Learning

This environment of learning is a crucial student-centered learning process because it promotes student interaction. When students work in groups, they exchange ideas, challenge one another by defending their points of view which as a result, builds student's confidence to express him or herself in the new language being acquired. Once each group presents its findings on events (from Step 1), the very same group poses its questions in an open-ended or a multiple-choice fashion. This task offers the student the opportunity to improve his/her writing skills in the target language. The questions could be used in a game setting environment (i.e., playing "Jeopardy") which even challenges students more to get the correct answers and win the game.

Moreover, the aforementioned environment of learning enables the language learner to enrich his/her vocabulary. Once each group finishes its presentation, each member will list the new vocabulary on the board. At this stage, the

class can start a new game- this time, focusing mainly on the vocabulary. Some example games can include “Password Plus” where the students must guess the targeted word by receiving three key words from the opposite group, “Lip Reading” where one person from the opposite group wears a headphone while listening to music played at a high volume guessing the vocabulary words that the members of the opposite group pronounce.

Jigsaw Learning

With respect to collaborative learning where students feel the sense of shared responsibility, the jigsaw method is a cooperative and collaborative learning technique which promotes student interaction and teamwork to accomplish the pending task.

Second Language teachers can promote student interaction and teamwork to consider multiple angles on complex issues. Role plays are very instrumental in this type of a setting. Students love to engage themselves in presidential elections and debates. As the initiator of this task, the teacher can create a setting of a townhall meeting where the first group of concerned citizens present their concerns to the second group, that of the presidential candidates, the third group will consist of the moderators and the fourth, the media. Each member plays his/her role. At the end, all groups reconvene and listen to presentations from other groups. The final outcome provides all groups with an understanding of their own role. This type of a learning environment not only promotes participatory learning but also serves as a platform for students to utilize their grammar skills. By participating in the role play, they have to switch grammatical tenses and moods to carry out the task. As one can see, the discussion of current events serves as a platform for grammar review in the language learning classroom.

Problem-Based Learning

Problem Based Learning is a teaching method where students learn thorough solving real-world problems. Discussion of current events and issues is the platform where students learn to solve real-world problems and develop their critical thinking abilities. In a foreign language classroom while discussing current events students could be presented with issues such as immigration, poverty, and illiteracy. The aforementioned topics not only can serve as a hook for student engagement by addressing real-world issues but also could be a platform for students to debate by bringing in their opposing viewpoints, reasoning, and critical analysis to articulate their arguments based on evidence gathered. This environment of learning not only fosters critical thinking but also allows the student to improve his/her speaking skills.

Blended Learning

Blended learning is a teaching strategy that combines the face-to-face with on-line learning. Thanks to the Internet, students have a wealth of information and activities at their fingertips that enhance their learning experience which enable them to engage with their classmates outside of the classroom. Integrating current events in the language classroom not only promotes participatory and lifelong learning, develop critical thinking skills, build media literacy in the target language that students acquire but also it develops a greater global awareness for students of the world that surrounds them.

In closing, Kat St. Pierre affirms in *Montessori Life*, “Life is a combination of beautiful, wonderful, and often complex issues ... and though some might not have the vocabulary to communicate it, they are aware of both the beauty and complexity in their environments.”

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