Interpersonal Communication in the Classroom And Engaging Boys

Heather Newman

Marist College
It is important to make time for interpersonal communication in the classroom, especially in a world
language class. Students can help each other grow, practice listening, and engage in problem solving
together. It is also important to practice the target language aloud. I always make sure we have a lot of
time for interpersonal communication between students in my classroom.

My Spanish class consisted of ten urban students, and was at an all-boys school. I found it was
important to engage them beyond what the curriculum suggested. The district-wide (county-wide)
curriculum needed many changes to be suitable for my group of students.

Boys are often relational learners (Johnson, 2013). They need to connect to their teacher in order to
want to be engaged. Boys show high levels of productivity when teachers provide positive experiences
for their students. Also, boys have a lot of energy, and teachers need to capitalize on that. Boys also
must feel like school is not full of harsh, useless tasks. They must be given tasks that utilize their energy
and imagination, and are interesting and useful to them.

In our Spanish III class, we had just finished the lessons on commands and had moved on to the
“Camping” unit. We started with vocabulary, and it quickly became apparent that my students were not
pleased with the district’s choice of unit. They said things like, “Why do we have to learn this, we’ve
never been camping,” or, “Ms. Newman, I don’t even know what canteen means in English.” During an
activity, students were struggling at describing how to do camping activities, because most of them had
never had any experience camping. My district took an immersion-approach to language learning, and
the students were to mostly speak in Spanish throughout the whole class. However, at the beginning of
this unit I could tell I was losing them, as they complained about the curriculum content and constantly
broke into English. I realized that my students felt I was giving them a harsh, useless task.

I asked my students how many people had camped before, and three people out of ten raised their
hands.

The next day, I told my students we were going outside. I had gotten permission to go to the edge of
the school property, just before the woods. There, I had set up an actual camping site, with all of the
actual camping objects in the textbook. Students were strategically partnered up, and as a warm up
given a scavenger hunt in Spanish where they had to figure out which objects correlated with the
Spanish words. Each object was numbered, and they had to write the number of the object next to the
Spanish word.

The students walked around and helped each other identify the objects. Also, students did things like
pick up the binoculars, and look through them for the first time in their lives. One said, “wow, that’s
what binoculars do?”

The students went on to complete a lesson, but barely noticed they were working hard. By simply
bringing them outside to a camping scene, I had engaged them and provided a positive experience for
them. I also showed that I can related to them and I care for them, and I want them to learn in an
environment that is interesting to them.

Cooperative learning is based on a small group approach (Orlich, 269). It is an approach where students
help each other, learn from each other, and feel a sense of accomplishment when they are done with
the task because they are all held accountable. There is much empirical support for cooperative
Clearly defined group goals are important for the achievement of the students, and cooperation helps students solve problems. Students often feel positive about working with their peers.

During interpersonal lessons, students can listen to their peers and make adjustments to their own communication (Shrum, 155). Crafting lessons where students verbally communicate with each other in LOTE classes give students an opportunity to think outside of a text and engage in a higher level thinking process.

In my class, I had a system where students were rewarded at the end of two weeks for not breaking into English during “Español total” time. The students were divided into small groups, with the three experienced campers as group leaders. Drawing on their former knowledge, commands, students had to communicate to each other how to complete a camping task. For example, one group had to use the command form to direct each other on how to set up a tent. The students were interested in the activity and were speaking Spanish again. They were negotiating language and thinking about how to deliver commands while incorporating the new camping vocabulary. I walked between the three groups and graded them on a simple rubric that they were accustomed to using for conversational activities. The experiences campers were able to help the group complete the task. At the end, the students were happy and felt satisfied that they, for example, assembled a tent.

Their cooperation helped solve problems. Not everyone knew what every camping object was before the start of the lesson, but with the assistance of a classmate, they were able to help each other figure them out.

Later, students were more eager to complete a writing task- a “postcard home” about camping, since they now enjoyed the topic. It is apparent from their writing that this writing assignment was now agreeable to them (Picture 1, Picture 2, Picture 3).

Then, the group leader who knew how to pitch a tent helped other students figure out how to do it, all while all of them were practicing speaking and listening to Spanish. And lastly, students helped each other figure out wording solutions by modeling Spanish for each other, and negotiating the language. Sometimes a student wouldn’t know how to phrase something, and they would make a motion to show what they needed to say, and someone would offer them the solution. I gave my students an opportunity to think outside of a text, listen to each other, learn from each other, and make adjustments in their own speaking.

I was very satisfied with my lesson and my students. My students were at all different levels of Spanish literacy and cultural literacy. Some were quicker at coming up with commands than others, and some needed a reminder of how the conjugations were formed from their peers. They much enjoyed negotiating the language between them while pitching a tent with their peers and receiving credit for it, over sitting in a classroom and constructing the same commands while being prompted by a handout or a textbook.

They also got to learn about camping, by experiencing a camp site and helping create it in person with their peers. The unit connected camping to an eco-friendly way people visit and stay at Spanish speaking countries, so once we were experienced with camping, we could move on to a meaningful connection to Spanish culture, our environment, and our community. My three group leaders helped the other students learn about camping in an engaging way.
One thing I would have done differently for this unit is take an inventory of the students’ knowledge of and exposure to camping, instead of assuming that all of the students knew what camping is like. It was a difficult day when I tried to get my students to talk about a topic they could not relate to and knew almost nothing about.

If I were to do this lesson again, I would do a quick review of the rules of creating commands so that some of the conversations would have flowed smoother. Sometimes a student got stuck, and I could have prevented this by doing one last commands review before they were expected to recall it. However, when a student was stuck, their peers helped them out most of the time.

**Standards**

Standard 3 requires the candidate to understand how students differ in their learning. The teacher designs lessons that are adapted to the diverse students. The candidate:

- identifies prior experience, learning styles, strengths and needs

A teacher must be aware that students have had different experiences, and therefore different knowledge of various subjects. Also, students have different learning styles, and teachers must adapt their lessons to meet their needs. Additionally, it is important for an educator to identify and teach to the diverse needs of his or classroom.

After the first day of the unit, I identified the prior experience of my students, and discovered that many students had not engaged in the pastime of camping, a pastime that is not only popular in the US, but in Spanish speaking countries.

By identifying students who had prior experience and tasking them to teach others, I am playing on strengths and allowing students to help others in need of experience.

Also, a good educator knows that providing different learning styles helps all of his or her diverse students learn. The first day we started working in the classroom we identified words and made language connections, but then I gave them an opportunity to do a hands on activity. Some of my students really benefit from making explicit word connections and studying and memorizing the words, while others pick up the words better when immersed in the language, and filling in the gaps with help from their peers. All my students had the opportunity to do both during the unit.

- designs and implements individualized instruction based on prior experience, learning styles, strengths, and needs

An educator must be in tune to the specialized needs of each student, and plan his or lesson to meet those needs.

At the beginning of the unit, the level of understanding of a cultural pastime varied greatly. One way to play on the strengths of some students and the needs of other students is to have the experienced students guide those in need within a well-structured activity. I individualized my instruction to have those who knew something, teach something to small groups who did not know much on the subject. I handpicked the groups in a strategic way that facilitated learning growth.

- connects instruction to students’ prior experiences and family, culture, and community
A teacher should be able to portray to his or her students how the lesson connects to their lives.

In a concept that seemed so foreign to them, I proved to them that camping, an eco-conscious way of traveling done all over the world, was possible for them to do themselves. It was an active, enjoyable activity they could do with friends. I showed them that their peers have experience doing this pastime, and although many of them couldn’t fathom it the first day of the unit, I proved to them there were many fun aspects to camping, all while staying in the target language and learning how to talk about it. Later, we discussed why doing eco-conscious activities were good for communities, and we connected the discussion to our own community and environment.

Standard 5 has the candidate using many different teaching strategies to increase critical thinking and problem solving. The candidate:

-selects alternative strategies, materials, and technology to achieve multiple instructional purposes and to meet student needs.

An educator must think of different ways to promote student learning to meet the needs of the students. The curriculum called for different ways of learning to achieve multiple instructional purposes, like using websites to look up camping locations, guided discussions, reading and interpreting, and designing a camping schedule with camping activities. However, it was presumptuous to think that all students could talk about camping in a familiar way. What I did was selected a hands-on strategy, which met the goals of giving commands about camping in the target language, while also meeting the needs of the students by teaching them what camping was in the first place.

-engages students in active learning that promotes the development of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance capabilities.

A successful educator provides opportunities for active learning, where students are expected to solve problems and think critically. The students were all involved in active learning, and that was evident because they all were performing TPR actions. Students had to think about what they were doing and how to communicate to someone how to do something. They practiced giving and listening to instructions from their peers, all while solving a problem and completing a task. Students were held accountable for two tasks: participating in the conversation (graded by rubric) and completing the camping task. Everyone felt responsible for problem solving, while participating in an engaging activity.

References

