Chapter 2

Collaborative Learning and Concept Mapping for Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines how collaborative learning and concept mapping have been incorporated and implemented within a blended foreign language course. Focusing on these two approaches, it introduces the reader to LAPLI – The Language Learning Lab: a methodology of integrative CALL using the Internet. The aim in LAPLI's 12 activities is to challenge high-intermediate and advanced language students to go beyond their limitations and be more active and responsible for their own learning. Students, based on authentic material selected by themselves, work individually and collaboratively throughout its activities. They are stimulated to develop fluency and accuracy in the foreign language, focusing on the development of their reading and writing skills, but also promoting their oral and social skills. Some feedback from the students is presented. The chapter concludes with a few considerations on the challenges of life-long education.

INTRODUCTION

The use of collaborative learning and concept mapping activities in a language learning methodology is not what most language teachers would expect to come across. So why propose a methodology involving these approaches?

By and large, in foreign language courses for under-graduate students of all levels, teachers follow an adopted course book. This course book provides a pre-planned path, with pre-planned presentation material and exercises, aiming at achieving carefully selected and graded linguistic outcomes. The lessons are usually structured in the same way: the teacher has to cover parts "1", "2" and "3", on page "X", unit "Y" in classes "A" to "Z" and the students are asked to read, write, listen, watch, repeat and do the written and oral exercises in parts "1", "2" and "3", on page "X", unit "Y" in classes "A" to "Z". The teacher "teaches" and the students "learn". The

teacher, at the front of the class, asks students to open their books to page "K", presents the new material and asks students to practise. Students, in turn, open their books to page "K" and either work individually, in pairs (usually with their best friend or a colleague who invariably sits next to him/her in every class) or in groups (with usually the same mates). So, why offer alternatives to this peaceful learning environment?

By following the adopted book, probably written for an international market, teachers do what the author of the book suggests, not necessarily covering the subjects, grammar and social skills their group needs.

The teaching of languages to higher-intermediate and advanced level students can make use of a distinctive methodology. Most of these students are, or will be, language teachers and need to be motivated to continue learning the foreign language, practice the acquired knowledge and develop teaching and researching skills. They need to be challenged to practice their language skills and to expand their vocabulary. Besides, as it is the case with pre-service students, they need to be prepared for the job market to fulfil their professional and personal ambitions. Therefore they need to practise the target language in subjects that are interesting and relevant to them, in which they feel encouraged to communicate and contribute with (new) ideas, making decisions, accepting other people's opinion, supporting and refusing contributions.

For this to happen, it is necessary to change the current paradigm, centred on the teacher, to one which is centred on the student and which promotes responsibility, critical analysis and autonomy. As Behrens (2000) says, it is important to:

[a.] gradually reduce the number of theoretical lessons, increasing the time available to do research, to access databases, to give support in the construction of activities and the students' own texts; [b.] encourage students' development in both well planned individual and collective

group work activities with defined responsibilities; [c.] organise differentiated activities, events that require creativity, challenging projects that provoke cross-referencing, dialogue with authors and own production; and [d.] promote the use of electronic devices, of IT, of multimedia and telecommunications with all the available resources of the school campus. (p.121-2).

Teachers in general and language teachers in particular can maximise the advantages of collaborative learning. In collaborative learning, learners solve problems together and "learning is expected to happen as a side-effect of problem solving, measured by the elicitation of new knowledge or by the improvement of problem solving performance." (Dillenbourg, 1999, p. 4). However, to maximise the possibilities of collaborative learning to occur, Dillenbourg (1999) posits that some types of interaction need to happen which he classifies in four categories: a) to set up initial conditions (for instance, how many students will there be in each group, who will chose group members, the teacher or the students themselves; should the members of the group share the same point of view or not); b) to over-specify the 'collaboration' contract with a *scenario* based on *roles* (e.g., asking students to play different roles or giving members access to different data); c) to scaffold productive interactions by encompassing interaction rules in the medium (such as asking all members of the group to express their opinion at each stage); and d) to monitor and regulate the interactions (by the teacher assuming the role of a 'facilitator' instead of a 'tutor'. The teacher does not provide the right answer or reveals who is correct – s/he only directs the group work by providing 'hints' to the students, interfering with their work as little as possible (p. 6). For Kirschner, Strijbos & Kreijns (2005, p. 31), teachers should make students aware of their responsibilities when working in groups. Each group member needs to be accountable for his/her own work ('individual accountability' in Slavin, 1980), for

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