

The language classroom rebooted into “intercultural first spaces”: Theory behind, and notes on, an oral assessment experiment

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Abstract: This paper argues by example that the language classroom needs to be moved out into the community, where students should be encouraged to negotiate meaning and identity in the target language by means of handheld technologies and social media.

Keywords: Embodied learning, community-based learning, flexible learning, social media.

1 Introduction

I was quite pleased, last year, to receive the OWILT call for papers, which offered the following bulleted list as a working, and of course hardly exclusive, definition of what innovation in language teaching might entail:

- Flexible Learning in Language Classes
- Community-based (experiential) learning
- Innovative uses of technology in the language classroom
- Social media as a language learning tool.

My pleasure stemmed from the fact that over the last few years, and mostly in response to my dissatisfaction with the staleness of my own practice, I had been working to take my language classes in a direction informed by these very imperatives (or, at least, I have come to view them as imperatives). The OWILT conference would give me the opportunity to talk about some of the apparently innovative things I’d been trying. And for twenty minutes or so that’s what I did.

In the second half of this paper I will discuss the oral assessment experiment on which I focussed at the conference. In the paper’s opening few pages I’ll concentrate – in more depth than I could at the conference – on some of the ideas informing not only that experiment, but my language teaching generally, such as they are.

2 From the multilingual subject to the intercultural first space

My first response to the aforementioned staleness I saw in my own teaching took the form of two questions:

- Who is today’s university level foreign language learner? (I was sure I did not really know.)

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- Where could (and perhaps ‘should’) their classroom be? (I was sure of two things: that this was not in the cramped confines of the classrooms I was being assigned; and that I *really wanted* to know where it might be.)

I came up with a provisional list of answers, with the help of Claire Kramersch (or rather, with the help of some of her ideas), for the first question at least:

1. The foreign language learner is from somewhere. Another way of putting this is to say that “ethnic, class and sexual facticity matter in the language classroom.” (This is certainly the case at my university. That being said, this is the answer – or fact – I deal with least in what follows.)
2. The learner is always in the process of becoming someone. Or otherwise put: every individual learner’s identity is in process.
3. Language plays a crucial role in the negotiation of this identity. (And, the foreign language being learned – as distinguished from the mother tongue – offers unique opportunities for this process.)
4. Increasingly, technology, and especially social media, play an important role in the negotiation of numbers one through three.

Kramersch, if I understand her correctly, has recently acknowledged points one through three in her engagement with what she calls “the multilingual subject,” a term she explains in terms of

the fact that learning a language [...] even outside the environment in which the language is taught engages not only the cognitive framework and their pragmatic communicative competence, but all kinds of subjective aspects including issues of identity [...] [Learners] often find in that second or foreign language an outlet for all kinds of dreams and aspirations that they don’t find in their own language. (Kramersch, 2012, p. 75)

That stale language teacher mentioned earlier (me) was pretty good at engaging his students’ “cognitive framework and their pragmatic communicative competence.” His students were good test takers, many of them even expert grammarians by the time he was finished with them. What he was not acknowledging – at least not sufficiently – and so was not engaging, were “the subjective aspects including issues of identity” that Kramersch highlights. And this lack of acknowledgement, in hindsight, worked to the detriment of his students’ ability to communicate in personal and creative ways in the language he teaches: German. (A reality that became increasingly unacceptable for him and his students.)

According to Kramersch, we fail our students if we see language learning as “a question of accumulating labels.” Rather, language learning is an engagement of the whole individual, and language teachers “should be more aware that the bodies they have in front of them are in fact acquiring the language with all their senses; not just their brains, but their eyes, ears, their touching, their smell” (Kramersch, 2012, p. 75). The fact that language acquisition involves the whole self, and so all the senses, bears on my second question above, the one regarding where the language classroom could (and perhaps ‘should’) be. It certainly demands that teachers provide their learners with

more than books, sound files and videos within, if you'll humor an academic pun, 'the prison house of language' that the classroom can so easily become. So much realia, let's be honest, is cross-cultural – as common here as it is there – and yet very few of the actual things encountered in everyday life whether in Beijing or Barcelona make it into the classroom to be named and discussed after being seen, touched and smelled. (And, of course, many culturally peculiar things are available the world over these days. Their appearance in the classroom – where these can be seen, heard, touched and smelled – should also be encouraged.)

I think implicit to Kramersch's argument for viewing the language learner as a 'multilingual subject' is an argument that goes beyond a call to enliven the traditional classroom environment. Indirectly she is arguing, I feel, for community-based, or experiential, learning, a useful definition of which highlights that: "all communities have intrinsic educational assets and resources that educators can use to enhance learning experiences for students" ("The Glossary," n.d.). It has always struck me as strange, and as a shame, that foreign language learning, and especially as it is practiced in the university setting, fails miserably at taking advantage of the embarrassment of experiential riches available in the community. Even when seen in terms of Kramersch's "acquiring labels," going out into a real world full of three-dimensional signifieds that can be experienced with all the senses has clear advantages for acquiring, and retaining, language structures and content. However, when we start to see language learners as whole subjects – that is as embodied and multi-sensory entities engaged in a process of identity becoming – then getting out into the community to experience its riches becomes a demand.

This demand is not so much for an "intercultural third space," I would argue, rather for encouraging and facilitating language learner access to what I'll call, for lack of a better phrase, the "intercultural first space"; that is: to the everyday environment in which individuals, whether from here or there, engage with common things and with others; and thereafter with and about those things that are not shared in common. This space is "first" precisely because so much of it is shared across cultures; and in a fundamental sense this is because the process of identity formation happens out in the shared everyday world, regardless of where this everyday world is situated on the planet. This world's shared reality, I would also argue, makes it a far better place from which to discuss and explore differences than in any classroom, no matter how well endowed – and often in spite of how well endowed – with "authentic" materials from the "target" culture that necessarily artificial space may be.

3 The language learner and new technologies of the self

Of course, the role that virtual spaces play in the process of identity negotiation and formation needs acknowledgement here. Undeniably, the media through which the process of subjective constitution occurs have changed radically over the past four decades. If I might be permitted to misappropriate a term used by Michel Foucault, what we've seen develop at a rapid pace are radically new "technologies of the self" that have opened up spaces for language use, and via this use identity development, that we as language teachers have a responsibility to understand and harness. While Foucault, were he alive, would certainly stress the pitfalls inherent to the personal devices and social media now saturating society globally – and these pitfalls are not lost on those of us who have ever had a student distracted, either by choice or not, by

their smart phone – he would also have to acknowledge the potential such media hold for just the kind of creative assertion of identity I see Claire Kramersch calling for in the language classroom. Indeed, much of not only the communicating, but moreover the “dreaming and aspiring,” that our students do these days happens by means of social media, whether via text, tweet or Facebook post. Students assert their identities not only via language, of course, but also through files – whether visual or sound – that represent not only what they do, like or dislike, want and desire, but ultimately who they are. In a sense, language learners – with this certainly being the case for the vast majority of university students – are represented by avatars they are daily in the process of forming online. As language teachers, I believe we ignore the ontological role that these media play today at our, and our learners’, peril.

The smart phone is another example, I would argue, of an “intercultural first space,” in as much as, no matter where you come from in the world, it is likely that you use one, and further that the one you use has the same functionality to that used by anyone from anywhere else. As with the experientially rich community outside the classroom, which I argued earlier is woefully underutilized as a language learning resource, the language teacher’s task with these new media (and, for that matter, with any media) is to encourage and facilitate communication in the target language.

This can be done in the classroom, of course, but demands more than what has become common practice: allowing students to use online dictionaries. Facebook groups and the incorporation of tweeting into the curriculum, when done properly – with a task-based focus – are effective means by which students can represent themselves, and get to know their classmates, in the target language. I have tried all of these things – with varying degrees of success. And I encourage my colleagues to experiment with these new technologies of the self, too.

4 Das Experiment

Which brings me to the oral assessment ‘experiment’ I mentioned in my introduction, on which I presented at the OWILT conference, and which – for me at least, at least thus far – is unique in that it occurred in both of the “first intercultural spaces” I have discussed here; or, put otherwise, because it incorporated all four of the bullet points I referenced in my introduction, and which were included in the OWILT conferences call for papers as representing areas of innovation in language teaching: flexible learning; experiential learning; innovative use of technologies; and of social media.

A bit more relevant background:

I have always found oral assessment, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels, to be the least innovative part of the foreign language learning curriculum. In fact, I know oral assessment to be an exercise in frustration for all involved: students and teachers alike. This point has been hammered home to me on many occasions. The one that stands out occurred at a department meeting during which the student representative attending stood up to lament, on behalf of his colleagues, the artificiality of the oral assessment situation. This young man took the words right out of my mouth in outing what is a kind of dirty little secret in foreign language teaching: “You either ask us to prepare for an interview, or to prepare a skit or roll play, or both. Then you tell us to *make it natural*. To not memorize our answers or lines in advance. Well, I can

tell you that's exactly what we all do because that's how to get the best mark. We don't learn or prove anything. And at the end of the process we can't express ourselves verbally in the language at all. And that isn't our fault." I agree with him.

In an effort to naturalize the artificiality of oral assessment, and informed by my desire to incorporate both more experiential and social media supported tasks into my curriculum, I last year offered my second-semester German students an alternative to the skit-based oral examination we normally use. This alternative, they were told, would involve:

- Meeting their classmates at Vancouver's Granville Island Public Market (a large and vibrant destination for locals and tourists alike and which contains stalls offering everything from local handicrafts to exotic spices to freshly caught seafood)
- Arranging, and navigating to, a meeting point of their choice in the market via text message
- Breaking up into smaller groups within which to "experience and discuss" the sights, sounds and smells of the place together for 45 minutes
- Record their experiences as photographs, videos, and sound files using their mobile devices
- Post these files, as much as possible in real time, to a Facebook page designed for the task
- Attend a short 'debrief chat' with their instructor (me) at a nearby café
- Do all these things as much as possible in German.

Seven of a group of 30 students signed up for this alternative. They hailed from: Mexico City; Salt Spring Island, BC; Seoul, Korea; Ningbo, China, Richmond, BC; Langley, BC; and Tokyo, Japan. There are a few things to know about this group. Five were female. With the exception of the students from Mexico and Japan, who had begun learning German in high school, all began their first level of German at my university and the same time, at which time they were absolute beginners. The group was surprisingly representative ethnically of the class as a whole: international students make up a large minority of our learners, with those from Asian backgrounds the largest international subgroup. And, all of these students were, not surprisingly – considering they signed up for such an assignment – highly-motivated.

Students were armed with their own smart phones, all of which had a camera with video and photo capability, a sound recording application, were screenshot capable, and had both the Facebook application and an online dictionary application.

Obviously, reporting here on the results of a task whose output took various digital forms could only be incomplete and underwhelming. Nevertheless, it is hoped the following transcriptions provide some idea of the richly experiential and linguistically productive time these students spent together in the market.



Figure 1 Screenshot of text message exchange between two participants

Their first task, which involved navigating to one another by text message, produced, among others, the following representative conversation between two participants, both of whom are ethnic Canadians:

Student A (5:07 PM): – Ich bin hier. – Hinter dem restaurant joes – Wohin gehts du? ☺

Student B (5:08 PM): – Wo ist das? Ich bin bei Robson und Burrard

Student A (5:10 PM): – Geradeaus von Burrard und dort geht links zu Granville strasse

Student B (5:12 PM): – Okay Ich glaube dass ich dich finden kann – Oder bin ich doof

In English their brief discussion reads:

Student A: – I'm here – Behind the restaurant joes – Where are you going? ☺

Student B: – Where is that? I'm near Robson and Burrard (streets)

Student A: – Straight from Burrard and then go left to Granville street

Student B: – Okay I think that I can find you – Or am I stupid

The first thing to note is that these students apparently cheated (or were not clear on the instructions), as they navigated to one another in another part of the city, from where they then travelled together by bus to the market. They nevertheless evidently found one another, as they arrived at the market on time. The conversation took a total of six minutes, with messages being sent back and forth at an interval of approximately two minutes. This is to say they generated their messages in relatively short order. The German shows some errors, but also a level of sophistication more than appropriate for

the level, especially considering the typing was done quickly and likely without double checking.

Student A asks: “Wohin gehst du?” She conjugates the verb incorrectly – it should read “gehst.” (This might have been a typo, however.) She also gets the imperative wrong in her next text: “... und dort geht links zu Granville strasse.” She should have written “... geh links ...,” and it should be “Granvillestrasse” (one word). That being said, her messages show solid German syntax – an achievement, as word order presents the greatest challenge for most beginner German learners.

But for a missing comma, Student B’s texts are grammatically and syntactically correct. This student also uses a subordinate clause, the rule for which is, arguably, the hardest syntactical challenge native English speaking beginner German learners face. Her final question – “Oder bin ich doof[?]” – shows the ability for humor in the target language. A welcome sight that shows some personality and creativity, and at a very early stage in her process of learning German.

As already mentioned, students were given the rather vague instruction to “experience and discuss the sights, sounds and smells” on offer at the public market. The following is a transcription of a pair of students doing exactly this. The video lasts 1 minute 25 seconds and features the girl from Salt Spring Island, BC, (Student A), reporting on her dinner purchase to the student from Korea (Student B).

Student B: Hallo _____! Was kaufst du heute Abend?

Student A: Ich habe eine Salate gekauft mit Tomaten und Käse. Er ist ...

Student B: Italienische. Italienische Salat.

Student A: Ja.

Student B: Und auch?

Student A: Ich habe Beeren gekauft. Die blauen.

Student B: Und warum kaufst du? Warum kaufst du ihn?

Student A: Weil sie sehr frisch und lecker sind.

Student B: Aha ...

Student A: Und ich mag sie sehr.

Student B: Und auch ... ich habe auch eine Salate von Maroc gekauft. Ich glaube, dass es hat Käse und Yams und ist ein bisschen salzig. ... Und ich habe viel Hunger.

Student A: Ahhhh.

Student B: Ich mag diese Salat.

Student A: Cool.

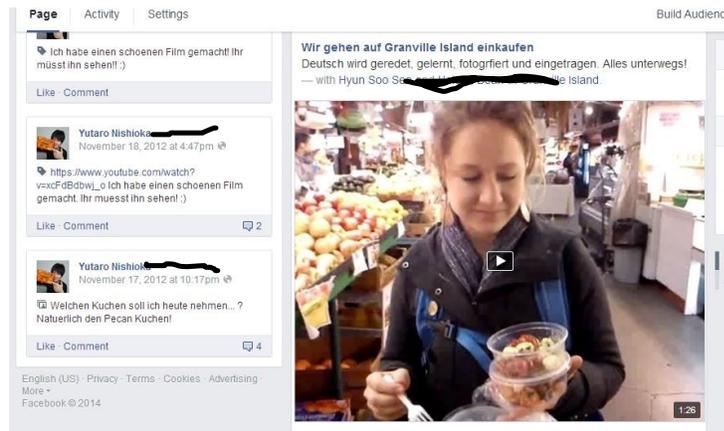


Figure 2 Screenshot of Facebook page with video of participants discussing their food purchases

In English this exchange reads:

Student B: Hi _____! What are you buying this evening?

Student A: I have bought a salad with tomatoes and cheese. It's ...

Student B: Italian. Italian Salad.

Student A: Yes.

Student B: And what else?

Student A: I have bought berries. The blue (ones).

Student B: And why do you buy? Why do you buy it?

Student A: Because they are fresh and delicious.

Student B: Aha ...

Student A: And I like them a lot.

Student B: And also ... I have also bought a salad from morocco. I think that it has cheese and yams and it's a bit salty. ... And I'm really hungry.

Student A: Ahhhh.

Student B: I like this salad.

Student A: Cool.

What should be immediately obvious is that this exchange is quite natural – and certainly when compared with any other oral assessment I have been privy to – and also constitutes both embodied and experiential learning. Student A as interviewer and camera woman not only comes up with her questions ad hoc – the video, which was posted to Facebook shortly after being shot, makes it quite clear nothing was rehearsed in advance – but does so while using a video camera in a bustling space full of people, some of whom can be seen moving around behind her partner against the backdrop of stalls selling cheese, fruit and fish. As for Student B, she reports on food she is not only holding, but is currently eating; food in which she is personally invested, having decided on, and then purchased it. These purchases, of course, also communicate authentic information about the student’s identity: about what she likes, but also about why she likes it. Her choices are all healthy: salads and fresh fruit. We learn why she’s purchased them: she’s concerned about health, but also has a taste for exotic things: an Italian salad, the other salad is Moroccan and “salty”; the berries are “fresh” and “delicious.” She’s bought so much food because “she is really hungry.”

As with my first example (of a text message exchange), there are a few grammatical and syntactical errors; but again, the degree of sophistication shown is more than acceptable for the level – indeed, it would be very good even in a traditional skit or interview oral assessment.

While Student A asks her questions in the present tense: “Was kaufst du heute Abend?” (What are you buying this evening?) – which does not interfere with sense at all, but is awkward – Student B shows good control of the compound past tense (the *Perfekt*). She answers: “Ich habe eine Salate gekauft mit Tomaten und Käse.” (I have bought a salad with tomatoes and cheese.) Then later: “Und auch ... ich habe auch eine Salate von Maroc gekauft.” (And also ... I have also bought a salad from morocco.) Her salad should be masculine, which in the accusative case needed here would read *den Salat*; and there’s some interference from French: the German word is *Marokko*. These are minor mistakes however, and are to be expected from oral communication at this level.

The two examples I have chosen to relate here are fairly representative of the overall submissions to the Facebook page, with the exception being that those students who began learning German at the high school level – namely a young lady from Mexico and young man from Japan – posted more and showed greater sophistication in the German language. In addition to screen shots of text message exchanges and video conversations, students also posted captioned images and conversations recorded as sound files. Subsequent to the exercise, students were encouraged to, and indeed did, comment on one another’s submissions. At the end of the process, the Facebook page was a rich and diverse document of their experiences.

5 Conclusion

Obviously, there are certain potential problems with such an assignment, the most serious of which concern its accessibility. Not all students can afford the extra time needed to take part. And there is also the question of costs additional to the regular curriculum, which at least extend to transportation. A further issue is that those students who took part were all highly motivated, with all but one of them being at least an A- student. While I am only speculating, I fear such an activity, if not made mandatory, would only attract highly-motivated learners. And, frankly, it is

problematic to *expect* students to move so far outside of the accepted language learning “comfort zone,” as inadequate as that zone is.

In retrospect, however, I feel the experiment was very successful, and this precisely on account of being experiential and technologically innovative. In response to being asked to utilize the potential of new technologies of the self in a classroom extended out into the community – to inhabit both of the “intercultural first spaces” I discussed above – these students responded with more personal, creative and interesting German usage than I have seen at any other time in my teaching, at least by learners at this level. Measured as an oral assessment – and I unapologetically acknowledge that it was much more than that – this experiment was also a success. While I consider it impossible to take all artificiality out of such assessments, the students who took part here communicated orally with very little of the artificiality born of the advance preparation other forms of oral assessment cannot help but demand.

In sum: I will certainly offer the assignment again; and will work to refine it over coming years.

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