

Teaching about the World's Countries Through Group Projects

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Rational

Do you dread the thought of teaching yet another required English course for students with various levels of English and various levels of motivation? Incorporating group projects into university English communication courses adds depth and increases students' active participation. It also enables the stronger students to help the weaker students allowing everyone to participate.

Introduction

I was charged with teaching English communication skills to 48 first year students at a low ranked university in Japan. The students needed to review basic vocabulary and grammar structures that they had studied in junior and senior high but had yet to master. I spiced up the curriculum and took it beyond your typical low-level English conversation course through incorporating the theme of national cultures and by utilizing group work for various assignments.

The required textbook for this course was *Inspire* by Cengage, though the course could be designed around any text. The themes of each chapter were incorporated into the group assignments. Students formed small groups at the beginning of the course and each group selected a country to research. Two major assignments were completed as a group: a skit and a country profile focusing on the country selected.

Setting the stage

To introduce the theme of cultural differences, I showed students a clip from the movie *Mr. Baseball*. The clip can be found on Youtube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdeFdFEbuqk. This led to a discussion of cultural differences between America and Japan, from simple differences in manners to deeper concepts of values.

Student skits

Students next researched the customs and culture of the country that they chose. They then created a skit to illustrate cultural differences. The skits were performed in front of the class. Discussions took place following each skit to ensure that the rest of the class understood the cultural differences portrayed. Some examples of cultural differences that students focused on were: manners, miscommunication caused by gestures, distinct gender roles, high context vs low context styles of communication, and relationship to time.

Country profiles

The chapter themes introduced in the textbook were *sports, nightlife, fashion, homes, weather, the environment, shopping, and education*. Upon completion of each chapter, students were required to research the chapter theme for their group's country. For example, if their country was Pakistan, they would research what sports were popular in Pakistan.

To ensure that the theme was thoroughly researched, students were required to answer specific questions regarding each theme. Some example questions were: *What's the most popular sport for people to watch on TV? What's a popular sport for boys to play in their youth? How about for girls? Does this country usually take part in the winter and summer Olympics? If so, which events are they typically strong in? Who are some of the famous athletes in this country?*

By the end of the course, students had acquired enough information to present their findings to the class in the form of an interview style presentation. One or two students played the role of the interviewer while the other students answered the questions. Some groups opted to rotate the role of interviewer among all students. Students also created powerpoint slides which added a nice visual component to the presentations.

Conclusion

Students provided positive feedback about the assignments and the theme of the course in their end-of-term course evaluations. Many enjoyed learning about other countries and gaining a deeper understanding of why people behave differently. By having a specific theme to the course that was supported by group assignments, students had a purpose to use English. They seemed to find comfort working with their peers which calmed the nerves of the less confident English speakers. They were also able to use their English, though basic, to communicate something meaningful during their skits and presentations.

Countries Profiled by Students

- Pakistan, Mexico, France, Russia, Philippines
- Germany, Australia, Thailand, Egypt, Jamaica

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