

Title: Improving Class Discussions to Develop Linguistic and Cultural Proficiency

Author: Ketevan Kupatadze

Affiliation: Elon University

Summary:

A Spanish professor redesigns class discussion in a 300-level course in order to better equip students' to read and understand original texts in Spanish, understand the socio-cultural contexts in which they had been created, and critically analyze them.

Background:

Introduction

As teachers, we have all felt exhilarated after an engaging class discussion or frustrated after a non-participatory one. We have experienced joy in a classroom where students have shown engagement with the material and wanted to express their thoughts, or sadness when students were unwilling or unable to do so. We have also experienced pushback from students who have refused to see the value of discussion, disassociating it from their understanding of what learning was supposed to mean. Discussion as a way of teaching is, perhaps, one of the most popular but most difficult activities to perform for teachers in the humanities. It is even more complicated when one teaches a foreign or second language and lack of linguistic proficiency becomes a barrier in communication and expression of high order thoughts.

This project was conceived with the conviction that the discussion-based learning is a valuable pedagogical tool that promotes student engagement, democratic habits of thinking and the development of critical and analytical skills. When used in a foreign language classroom, it also develops students' abilities to listen and to speak in a meaningful context. It addresses the aforementioned issues, taking the discussion-based teaching and learning as the primary pedagogical tool, with the following research question: How can a discussion be advocated, promoted and improved in a (foreign language) classroom.

Possible reasons that inhibit discussion are a) Lack of students' linguistic ability to perform a high order thinking; b) Students' cultural background (hierarchical structure of the student-teacher relationship (for example, students accustomed to listen to the instructor rather than engage in a dialogue); c) Lack of student interest/engagement with the material; d) all of the above.

To carry out the research centered around the goal of improving the quality of discussions in order to better develop students' linguistic and cultural proficiency, as well as their ability to think critically, I worked on redesigning two Spanish courses at lower 300-level: Spanish 333: Reading Texts, Reading Life and Spanish 314: US/Spanish-American Relations.

Institutional Context

The Spanish section of the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Elon University has recently revamped the curriculum. Our objective was to a) offer students a continuous sequence of courses that integrated the practice of language with the study of culture to develop students' transcultural literacy and critical thinking ability; b) make sure that students were progressing in their study, i.e. taking increasingly difficult courses.

As a result of the changes we made, the curriculum for students who minor or major in Spanish is divided into several levels: Lower 300-level (300 through 349), Upper 300-level (350 through 399), and 400-level (400 through 499). Students are expected to take two courses at each level progressively. At each level, we offer a number of courses with different themes, but all the courses share the three major goals of improving students' linguistic proficiency, increasing their ability to think critically and developing their intercultural competence. Our major objective when designing the goals for the courses at each level was to deepen students' understanding & knowledge of Spanish, and Spanish-speaking cultures, through meaningful reading and writing assignments, as well as through class discussions that focused on students' ability to think critically about both target and native cultures. For the detailed description of the new Spanish curriculum, major and minor requirements and all courses descriptions, please see the following web link.

Pedagogical Principles

The two courses I selected for this project share the goals of all other Spanish courses that are offered at lower 300-level. The difference between the courses at this level is their content. At the same time, I have specific goals and teaching strategies that are based on my belief in democratic learning and the necessity to create a community of inquiry in the classroom.

One of my primary goals teaching advanced (300-level) Spanish courses is to help students gain a better understanding of how language can and should be learned through the study of culture and through meaningful discussions about a variety of topics, rather than through the memorization of vocabulary and completion of grammatical exercises, something that many students who come to my classes expect. This pedagogical approach is supported by most recent research and developments in the discipline of FL teaching at higher education setting (Byrnes & Maxim, 2004; Kern, 2004; Kramsch, 1993) and is aligned with our department's, as well as university's goal of educating culturally competent individuals with the ability to think critically about contemporary global and local issues.

I also subscribe to the pedagogical philosophy that views discussion as an essential element of successful teaching and learning for the following reasons: a) it is inquiry driven and promotes active, inductive learning and encourages students to take on the role of knowledge creators; b) it is conducive to democratic teaching, as it creates conditions in the classroom that allow for a space where we all are equal participants and where we respect each other's opinions (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

Intellectual Goals and Student Performance Objectives

For the two course that I taught in the spring of 2016, SPN 320: Reading Texts, Reading Life, and Fall of 2016, SPN 314: US-Spanish American Relations, the intellectual goals were to a) develop students' analytical and critical reading skills through the reading of texts of various genres (short stories, novels, memoirs, comics books, films, etc.), as well as to improve their argumentative skills through class discussions and written work; b) develop students' cultural and, consequently, intercultural competence through the study of diverse past and present issues related to Spanish speaking communities; c) develop students' analytical reasoning and critical thinking abilities through various writing assignments, in and out of class discussions, reflections, etc.

The major goals in terms of **student performance objectives** was to increase a) their ability to read and understand original texts in Spanish; b) their understanding of the socio-cultural contexts in which they had been created; and, c) their ability to critically analyze texts, engaging in an intellectual discussion with their peers and with the instructor. My assignments had addressed this skill somewhat indirectly up until then and class discussions had shown me that while interesting and engaging, they were not always perceived by students as beneficial and educational. I had to admit that largely this was due to the contrast between my emphasis on the class discussions and their value for students' grades. Participation in the discussions was part of students' participation grades, which in itself tended to be vaguely defined and comprised only small percent of the final grade. To address this problem, I had to research various ways that could help me develop activities that would promote and encourage discussions in class and, at the same time, help students become more aware of the value of discussion and of their own learning through discussions.

I think that helping students appreciate the value of discussion as an essential component of their learning was most important. If students thought that they were engaged in a process that was valuable, both for their learning and their course performance, they would take it more seriously.

Identifying the Changes That Had To Be Made

In order to answer the initial research question and, in the process, address some of the lacunae that could be inhibiting discussions in the classroom, my plan was to:

1. Develop a detailed class participation rubric that would clearly show the importance I was giving to class discussions.
2. Develop new and/or improve existing assignments that would address students' abilities to think critically and analytically about the material and, as a consequence, have deeper and more thorough discussions inside and outside the class.
3. Develop assessment tools to better understand what students were learning from discussions and discussion-oriented class activities, i.e. to develop a better understanding of student learning through discussions.
4. Consider the use of native tongue in the assignment that was used to evaluate the development of students' critical thinking abilities in order to a) allow students to express high order thoughts in a language that they were comfortable with; b) compare students' critical thinking ability in the target and native languages and understand if the level of their linguistic proficiency was directly tied to the level of their critical thinking ability and, consequently, their ability and willingness to engage in a discussion.

A more detailed participation rubric would help me assess students' participation more accurately, as well as incorporate the elements within the rubric that would specifically address the quality of their participation in class discussions. The newly developed detailed participation rubric would also help students see the relevance of the discussion and its effect on their grade.

I also recognized the need to develop new assignment(s) that would target students' ability to think critically and analytically about the material, establish connections between the course material and their lives, between their academic and professional identities, between my and

their goals, etc. I believed that such understanding would improve the quality of discussions as it would address students' interests more explicitly and, consequently, engage them with the course material more directly. My plan was to design an assignment in which students would be able to be in charge of the discussion, a) to be exposed to the practical aspects of planning for and executing it; b) to address more closely the issues that they considered relevant; c) to come to value the discussion as an essential element of the learning process. In the process of the project, I developed an activity called *Group Discussion*, which I will describe later.

To address the 3rd and 4th parts of the plan, I decided to incorporate *Discussion Participation Portfolio* into the two courses I was working on redesigning. The assignment was originally developed by Brookfield and Preskill in their book titled *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (1999). I will describe the assignment in detail later when I discuss the changes I implemented. I will note here that although the selected two courses were taught in Spanish, the Portfolio was to be completed in students' native tongue, as part of my question was whether students would be able to perform high order thinking in their native tongue considerably better than in the target language.

Implementation:

Discussion Participation Portfolio

The first assignment I decided to implement was the *Discussion Participation Portfolio* developed by Brookfield and Preskill (1999). I adapted the portfolio to fit the context and purposes of the course I was teaching. The second time I used the portfolio, I made adaptations to the original version reducing the number of prompts included, as well as specifying the number of times students responded to the prompts. I also included a note about how students' responses were going to be evaluated.

Although I chose not to evaluate (grade) students' reflections in the Portfolio, I thought that it was important to look at students' reflections in the portfolio separately from grading and after the course was over, as a way to see how many students were showing certain qualities in their reflections that were of particular interest in the context of my project. For this purpose, I developed a set of decoding guidelines that would provide me with another window into the outcome of the assignment.

Self-Assessment of Participation

During the second iteration of the course, in the fall of 2016, I also made changes to the rubric to evaluate students' participation. Students self-assessed their participation regularly in order to a) become more familiar with the criteria that I used to evaluate their participation; b) think more actively of and be more involved in the process of assessing their participation; c) develop better communication between the students and the instructor (having regular feedback and communication about the expectations and impressions about participation, in my opinion, would be beneficial both for students and for me).

Group Discussion and Review

As part of my efforts to change students' approach to teaching and learning as a one-sided activity in which teacher has an active role while students' role is passive (meaning that they are passive recipients of the information that is conveyed to them by their professor), I developed a class activity that, in my view, encouraged students to be in charge of their own learning. Once or twice during the semester, a group of students was asked to prepare a review and discussion session for their peers and lead the class. Students were asked to think of the material that had been covered recently, summarize it with the help of questions, activities, handouts, etc. and come up with discussion topics that could a) enrich our conversations about the material; b) approach the issue from their perspective and, consequently, become more relatable to students; c) promote critical thinking about the subject matter.

Moodle Posts

(Critical/reflective commentaries on the day's assigned material, shared with the class on course management site)

This was another assignment developed in hopes of promoting student engagement with the course, as well as conversations and exchange of ideas among the students outside the class. Eight or ten times throughout the semester, students were asked to contribute with a short (200-250 words) critical comment or question related to the assigned material before coming to class. These comments were intended to help students start thinking critically about the material before coming to class, as well as enter in dialogue with each other as they read their peers'

posts. This was also helpful for me, as the instructor, as it gave me an idea of what students understood from the assigned material and what were they struggling with. The posts usually served as starting points for our class discussions.

Student Work and Reflections:

My basic goal during the spring 2016 and fall 2016 semesters was to improve the way I measured students' participation and engagement in discussions (whether inside or outside the class). I wanted to do this in order to a) have a better understanding of what students were learning in the class; b) have a better understanding of whether I was achieving my goal of developing students' critical and analytical thinking together with their knowledge of culture. For this purpose I assigned *Discussion Participation Portfolio*. Students were asked to work on the portfolio throughout the semester. They could choose when to write and which prompt to use, as long as they completed at least one entry every two weeks. Portfolio prompts were given in English and students were writing in English (or Spanish, if it was their native or proffered language).

The examination of student work (*Discussion Participation Portfolio* entries) was eye opening. Appendix 6 includes quotes from student portfolio entries.

Some of the aspects of the assignment that had a very positive impact on student learning where:

- a. *Having the variety of prompts that guided students' reflections.* With the specific prompts and with a variety of topics to choose from, students were able to focus their reflections and rely on specific examples from class discussions and readings to support their arguments. I felt that my goals of developing students' critical and analytical thinking abilities, as well as their appreciation of ambiguity, of diversity, and of collaborative learning were being reached.
- b. *Having the opportunity to write in English (or the language of their choice).* This was, in my opinion, a crucial aspect of the assignment. It made me aware of the difficulty that students face when trying to express their ideas in a language that they have not mastered yet. Reading students' responses I was surprised at how much deeper their thoughts were when written in English. It made me more aware of the link between linguistic mastery and the quality of intellectual engagement. Having students write their entries in English also made me more aware of the efforts of my students to learn a second language; i.e. the need to work continuously and consistently on developing their linguistic abilities when it comes to writing and sharing their opinions. Students who were shy in the classroom wrote interesting portfolio entries that showed their interest in the topic, as well as their willingness to engage with the text, with class discussions, etc. It showed me that sometimes the very quiet students (who usually receive a lower participation grade in language courses that emphasize oral communication), do have so much to share; they learn and they share what they learn when they answer the prompts in writing and in their native language.
- c. *Developing students' ability to engage in discussion in Spanish.* One of my major goals during the Spring 16 semester was to increase and enhance the quality of discussions throughout the course. This not only meant engaging students in meaningful and intellectual discussions, but also convincing them in the value of such discussions. During previous years I have often received comments from student course evaluations that although the course was interesting, engaging, etc. they did not fully appreciate the importance of participating in class discussions as they did not see their pedagogical value. This time, it was different. Having the prompts helped students develop better understanding of what the discussions were meant for, what they were learning from

them and what their overall pedagogical purpose was.

After the courses were over, I reviewed students' Discussion Participation Portfolio entries again, to see how many students were showing certain qualities identified by me in the portfolio decoding guidelines in their reflections. This provided me with another window into the success (or failure) of my course goals. In the two courses that I taught, I collected data from 60 students (in the spring of 2016, I taught two sections of 320 and in the fall of 2017, I taught one section of 316). The table below shows the results:

Decoding guidelines to evaluate student perception of achieving the course goals	# of students who say this	# of students who give example(s)
Students' opinion about something has changed	51	27
Student learning was facilitated by/through group discussion, i.e. collaborative learning has occurred	55	90
Students developed confidence in speaking Spanish through class discussions	58	10
Students developed appreciation for ambiguity and complexity throughout the course	52	39
Students developed an understanding of diversity and empathy throughout the course	57	48
Class assignments and discussions helped them understand their own assumptions and biases	46	35

I also analyzed "course evaluations" completed by students, looking specifically for the prompts that addressed the learning goals that I had set out for the project. My particular interest was to understand students' perceptions of whether the course design fostered good intellectual development. Below are the samples of student responses to "Course Evaluation" prompts.

Course Evaluation Prompts	Strongly agree	Agree	Overall points (out of 6)
Course assignments fostered analytical/critical thinking	79%	21%	5.79
The instructor supported a class environment of mutual respect	100%		6
The instructor challenged students to think critically about course material	80%	20%	5.8

How can this information inform future teaching practices and what future modifications could be made to further improve student learning?

Discussion Participation Portfolio can be useful for anyone who wishes to a) learn more about what students are thinking/learning in the course; b) engage students in critical thinking outside the class; c) promote critical and analytical thinking in general; d) promote participation, especially if students are shy to express their thoughts in class for many different reasons.

Developing the *Discussion Participation Portfolio* helped me understand better my own teaching, as well as students' learning practices. I would like to continue using it, but would like to integrate students' responses into class discussions. My goal will be to use the prompts in class during our discussions a) to elicit responses/conversations in Spanish; and b) to encourage shy students to share their opinions with others. My plan is to give students time to write their responses in class to then share them (voluntarily) either in small groups or with the entire class.

I also noticed that taking into consideration the content of each course is very important when designing the prompts for the Discussion Participation Portfolio. While some questions might be relevant, every course cannot possibly address all of them. When I use this assignment in the future, I will be more careful in selecting and/or designing the prompts that fit well with the course focus/topic.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that for the first time during my teaching career, students were commenting about the use of discussion (through diverse types of assignments) in my courses and acknowledging its place and value. While, in the past, discussion has been part of my pedagogy, its value had been unnoticed or underappreciated by students because I had assumed a) that students would inherently know the place and the importance of discussion as a pedagogical tool; b) discussion would happen spontaneously, without the need to prepare myself or students for it, or to develop specific pedagogical tools to promote it. Once I recognized the need to talk with students about the value and the importance of discussion, as well as the need to make the discussion, in its diverse forms and through different assignments, an essential part of the course, I started seeing the desired results.