Using Graded-Conversations to Enhance Language Learning and Student Collaboration

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Language teaching entails the use of varied methods to maximize learning. Most language educators, particularly those teaching foreign languages tend to use lesson review sheets, dialogue practice, drills on grammar, audio tapes or text recordings. Educators also make use of media to enhance learning while a few language instructors use graded-conversations. Thus, this paper explores ways in which graded-conversations impact language learning. This paper shows how using graded-conversations in a Swahili language classroom enhanced language learning and encouraged students to collaborate in and outside the classroom. More specifically, the findings indicate that while graded-conversations motivated students to communicate with each other beyond classroom and use social media to help each other study, assignments shape the type and quality of students' collaboration. Implications for teaching are presented.

Keywords: conversations, collaboration, language learning, language teaching

Introduction

Learning is a complicated and a rather multifaceted process that requires not only strategic and well-orchestrated plan but also commands active participation from the learner. In language classrooms, this process is compounded by several factors including the need for students to interact with one another (Cook, 2001). Although it may seem obvious for language learners to expect to converse with each other, often however, the conversations that students engage in are done in the classroom and hardly encourage them to collaborate with each other beyond classroom walls. One of the goals for teachers, especially African language teachers is to foster a sense of teamwork among students so they feel free and willing to work with each other in the target language but also become a family of learners who are ready to carry each other throughout their learning journey. Even more, interdependency is an aspect that reflects African culture, one that needs to be modeled and promoted in African languages classrooms, hence the need to cultivate it among students. This study sought to answer the following questions:

(1) How can an instructor promote collaboration among students inside and outside the classroom?

(2) Do graded-conversations affect students' learning? If so, how?

I will begin by giving a background on the concept of collaboration by presenting its meaning, and theoretical foundation. Thereafter, I give a review of the literature on the benefits and the challenges teachers encounter in their endeavor to make teamwork possible. Pertinent to this study, a brief discussion regarding the use of media in academia follows. The methodology and findings of this study are then discussed.

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Background

Definitions

Collaboration is a concept referring to the action of working with someone to produce or create something. This idea rests on the notion of laboring together with people who seek to allow others to join them to accomplish a task. Collaboration in education can be defined as getting students, who may or may not have comparable ideas, to work together in a schooling context to complete an exercise, project or assignment, to name but a few (Royal, 2014).

Research shows Collaborative Learning (CL) is one of the most effective means that enable learning to take place (Swain, 2000). According to Dillenbourg (1999), CL is a "situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together" (p. 1). Based on this meaning, "two or more people" can be a pair, a small group with three to seven students, a class of 10-40 students, a community of one hundred or a thousand, or a community of several thousands of people. "Learn," implies students taking a course, studying specific materials, a participation in specific learning activities, or the accumulation of lifetime work-related training. "Together" suggests the numerous types of social interaction, such as face-to-face, media communication interceded by computer, telephone, tablets and the like that are organized systematically (Dillenbourg, 1999). Another definition closely related to this study is Jacobs, Power, and Log (2002) who define CL as "principles and techniques for helping students work together more effectively" (p. 1). This idea shows that CL doesn't mean merely having students work together in small groups only but rather, it underscores the sentient efforts made to ensure students learn successfully.

This paper does not delve into giving in-depth differences between collaboration and cooperation, however, the author draws some aspects from each concept. Most scholars tend to treat collaboration and cooperation interchangeably, thus, the debate between the two terms is quiet complex (Clark, Baker, & Li, 2007). A few of them point to some distinction between the usage of the two terms especially pertaining to second language learning—L2 such as in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995).

Collaboration is a structured form of learning whereby teachers give prescriptive teaching techniques to direct students on how to work together in groups to reach a targeted goal. Cooperative Learning is guided by social constructivist epistemology that seeks to acculturate students into the immediate community of learning and other members of the target language and culture. While in CL participants coordinate to engage mutually to solve a problem together, Roschelle and Teasley (1995) explain that cooperative work on the other hand is "accomplished by the division of labor among participants, as an activity where each person is responsible for a portion of the problem-solving" (p. 70). Thus, collaboration and cooperation differ epistemologically based on distribution of labor. Oxford's idea stresses the potential for learning to take place by allowing compromise and satisfaction in the learning process. However, it ignores the need for teachers to be intentional in structuring second language—L2 classrooms. Given the points made above, cooperative learning and collaboration in this study are not treated as dichotomous perspectives and are neither merged into one model. The author uses both concepts from a general sense by combining the vital elements of each idea.

I have come to believe that most teachers hope and wish to have their students collaborate in one way or another to bring quality learning, realistically however, the need for comprise becomes a critical need for group work to successfully take place (DuFour, 2006; Dumont, Instance, & Benavides, 2010). Thus, teachers must be

intentional about fostering collaboration among students because it doesn't come naturally or automatically. Below I highlight theoretical foundations of collaboration.

Theoretical Foundation

The concept of Collaborative Learning (CL) hereafter, draws from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) which views learning as fundamentally a social process galvanized through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Dillenbourg, 1999). This sociocultural perspective helps us understand ways in which learning takes place in accordance with the context and involvement with peers. Pertaining to this study, CL illuminates the fundamental relationship between social interaction and an individual's cognitive development. Learning, from this lens occurs based on interactions taking place during the learning process and among individuals (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

I draw from this theory because collaboration assumes interaction. In this notion, social interaction is a prerequisite for the growth and development of cognition among students (Donato & McCormick, 1994). In this study, media is used as a tool that mediates human interaction and cannot be parted from the social milieu in which it occurs (Wertsch, 1993). People's development is to be viewed in light of their social world. Likewise, learning takes place within social events that occur as students interact with people, events and even objects within their own environments (Vygotsky, 1986). Such exchanges enable them to think, reason and even solve problems with their peers (Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984). In this notion, the concept of CL in the Vygotskian tradition grounds this study by situating social interaction either among students or between a teacher and students, and underlines the basis for the teacher's role in facilitating students' learning.

Review of Literature

Benefits of Students' Collaboration

Research suggests that collaboration may support and enhance "intentional learning" and mindfulness (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Collaboration is not a strategy but rather a necessary part of education because learning takes place in a social context (Tinto, 1997). According to Vygotsky, higher level cognitive processes arise out of social experience and rather than just happening once, intellectual functions tend to happen twice—once externally among individuals at a social function, and second internally within an individual on a personal level (Vygotsky, 1986). Collaboration is critical because learning and knowledge depend on the availability of diverse opinions (R. T. Johnson & D. W. Johnson, 1994). Thus, nurturing one another by working together as a team is a needed element in academia for continual learning to take place.

More specifically, interactions among students allow knowledge acquisition as well as knowledge management and application to take place (P. E. Leonard & L. J. Leonard, 2001). For example, concepts, processes and vocabulary can be made clear when learners converse with each other as they work to justify, explain, generate or contrast their knowledge (Hossain & Tarmizi, 2013). Collaboration encourages one to contemplate and resolve intellectual issues in order to contribute effectively among other students (Panitz, 1999). One needs to understand, wrestle with discrepancies and solve complications before stating what he knows to somebody else. Even more, collaboration allows each person to contribute for the learning of his/her group as a whole (D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 2009). When one student comments, disagrees, requests clarification or elaborates a concept, he or she takes on responsibility for his own learning and that of others (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012), especially with the use of media such as typewith.me, skype, google Docs, and Wikis which essentially act

as a window on the mind of others. More importantly, when students share an intellectual task, what is hidden is made explicit and often discussed and clarified. Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) further elaborate the power of collaboration; they note: "Groups are not just a convenient way to accumulate the individual knowledge of their members. They give rise synergistically to insights and solutions that would not come about without them" (p. 40). Thus, collaboration may lead to a "whole" that is more than the summation of its parts.

Samad (2005)'s study of secondary school students in Bangladesh stresses the need for teachers to encourage collaboration among students by structuring instruction that encourages their involvement inside and outside classroom walls. Effandi (2003) found that students who learned cooperatively had higher academic achievement and were more motivated to learn than those whose teachers used conventional methods.

Challenges of Students' Collaboration

Despite the benefits collaboration offers, teachers face several challenges in making it an important element of learning in and outside classroom (Panitz, 1996). First, teamwork takes time (Ellerani & Gentileb, 2013). Often, it takes more time for each individual to express his/her thoughts. Besides, time is linear; when people take turns or work together, they use more time. Second, issues of power and voice are made explicit. Extroverted students tend to take most of the public time while those with shy, introvert personalities prefer to work alone, think slowly and quietly without letting others in their thinking. In order to maximize classroom collaboration while attempting to merge those two personalities, most educators use different types of modern media. Research shows that shy students tend to express themselves better and more when working with others online or on other social media avenues (Brown & Lara, 2011). For our discussion, below I highlight what literature says regarding the use of media and technology for schooling.

Media

Media and Language

The word *media* is a plural form of the word medium. It finds origin from a Latin word medius (middle). Implicitly, when something stands in the middle of points, it mediates or transmits goods between the two standpoints; it becomes a channel and a connector. Hence, medium refers to a channel or a passage and deals with the storage and transmission channels or tools used to store and deliver information or data (Moring, 2013). While the term may refer to any means of information communication, it is often used synonymously with mass media or news media (Tafani, 2009). Specifically, media is a terminology used to describe communication channels used to disseminate news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages (Cormack & Hourigan, 2007). It comprises all broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as telephone, fax, internet, newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, and direct mail.

However, for media to channel information from one end to another, it must use language (Vincze & Moring, 2013). Language is a tool that helps people convey what their minds wish to disclose (Moring, 2013). It allows people to communicate through a structured and conventional word system, be it spoken or written. Language and media co-exist. Without language, all the tools used to transmit information would be irrelevant (Vygotsky, 1986; Cormack & Hourigan, 2007). As such, media allows people to manipulate language to meet their social needs while transforming its shape and power in specific contexts (Adams, 2014; Melles, 2004). Language learning can be greatly enhanced when teachers take into account all facets of media available for private and collective use (Dunbar & Moring, 2012).

Media Use in School

While styles, shapes and level of media sophistication are ever changing, educators have used media in classrooms for decades past (Norton & Sprague, 2001). The role of media in education can never be undermined (Greaves, Hayes, Wilson, Gielniak, & Peterson, 2012; Lever-Duffy, McDonald, & Mizell, 2003). Media provide teachers and students with inventive and useful ideas while allowing teachers to meet students' needs and interests inside and outside of classroom. For instance, students get a lot of language practice through reading books, newspapers, magazines, or listening to radio, watch TV, movies, Internet, etc. Such activities develop students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, media entertains students while giving them confidence, motivation and ability to enhance their literacy skills outside the classroom (Greaves et al., 2012). Tafani (2009) affirms that media informs, amuses, startles, angers, entertains, thrills, but very rarely leave anyone not touched. Her analysis sums up the significance of media for educational purposes.

In universities, media use has provided teachers and students with vast amounts of information while motivating students to speak and collaborate with each other inside and outside the classroom (Alessi & Trollip, 2001). Don Tapscott (2009) in "Growing Up Digital" explains that this "Net Generation" does not watch much television compared to its parents. Because television is not interactive, it does not allow this generation to be active participants in all that they do and therefore, they prefer other ways to play a part in their communication and entertainment. Educators must not undermine the implication for social status that media delivers to its users. For example, like today, even back in 1997, Tapscott highlighted a report taken by Teenage Research Unlimited, whereby 80% of the teenagers surveyed said it was "in" to be online, which meant, using media and especially the internet to communicate was highly favorable and rather "cool" just as dating and partying. Media use creates a better learning environment by increasing student-to-student and faculty to student communication (Rogers, 2013).

Methodology

This study used an action research design (Stringer, 2014). Since my goal was to foster collaboration by involving other teachers to give me their input in identifying useful tools or assignments, I needed a teacher input as well as students' perspective. The study thus involved students and three teachers: myself and two other teachers. The first was a fellow language teacher while the other was a teaching assistant who had taken Swahili in previous years. I had a total of 28 students, 18 females and 10 of them were male. I invited both teachers to observe the class during the summer of 2014. The class met five days a week but the observing teachers could come three days a week. The class met for a total of 39 days.

At the beginning of the class, I was intentional in letting the students know my desire for them to be able to work together as a team. I first asked them to share their experience regarding collaboration in previous classes. Most of them said they only get help from other students if they happen to know them. Others felt that their teachers don't really try to make collaboration a big deal. After discussing details of my class syllabus and that the class will have "graded-conversations" as one of the key assignments, students immediately asked if they could use any media devices to communicate outside of classroom. With permission to do so, I then structured their conversations as follows.

Structure of Conversations

Students were put into pairs (they chose their conversation partner at the very beginning of the semester)

and worked with each other throughout the course. Before each conversation, students were given a topic such as "introduce yourself." I gave them a rubric with clear articulation of what needs to be included in the conversation (grading rubric). Below see a sample rubric.

Graded-Conversation 1—Rubric

Content

    The conversation needs to cover the following elements: Feel free to arrange them any way you want

- *Jambo* greetings—two aspects (one-on-one and about others)
- *Habari* greetings—two aspects (any two—how are studies, school, work etc.)
- Name (what is your name—you may use either "*Jina*" or "*-itwa*")
- Parent's names (both father and mother—use either "*Wao ni*…." Or "*Jina*")
- Siblings (Do you have a brother or sister)
- Birth rank (What is your birth rank (I am the first born or the middle child etc.))
- Nationality (Example: I am an American)
- What do you do for a living?
- Where do you go to school/which school do you attend and What is your major?
- Bring your conversation to an end (With thank you and goodbye)
  Point breakdown: Total—40 points
- Learned by heart—not reading script-5
- Pronunciation-5
- Grammar-15
- Intonation-5
- Speed-5
- Smooth conversation flow-3
- Length (15 or more lines for each participant)-2

    Students were given freedom to structure their conversations whichever way they wanted but they were to make sure they cover the content itemized in the conversation rubric. In the days leading to their graded-conversation, students were given time to create and practice their conversations for a few minutes in class but were also encouraged to do so outside of class. On the due day, students were to converse with each other without looking at their scripts while I, the teacher listened and graded their conversation. Students had a total of three main graded-conversations. To gain understanding of whether they were collaborating in and outside the classroom, I asked them to keep a conversation log (Table 1 below). I also invited them to reflect on the class in general but especially regarding the "graded-conversations".

Table 1

Sample 1 of Student Interaction Log

June 13: Ben and I discussed rough idea for first conversation script on the phone
June 14: We finalized our first conversation script and practiced on phone
June 18: Ben and I began discussing rough draft for conversation two's script on phone
June 19: We finalized conversation two's script and practiced on the phone
June 20: Ben and I studied for Quiz 1 over the phone
June 25: Ben and I talked about rough draft for oral exam script on phone
June 26: We finished oral exam script and practiced on the phone
June 27: We studied for comprehensive test over the phone

Findings and Discussion

Because of having to converse with each other for grade, data seem to suggest that graded-conversations motivated students to communicate with each other beyond classroom; and motivated them to use social media to help each other study. Data also show that assignments shape the type and quality of students' collaboration.

Graded-Conversations Motivated Students to Communicate With Each Other Beyond Classroom

To answer my first question: How can instructors promote collaboration among students inside and outside the classroom? I examined the interaction logs students submitted at the end of the term. Data show that students worked together outside of classroom by using a variety of media based on the type of assignment I gave them. Most students used text-messaging and phone calls to practice their conversations. Some used Facebook, e-mail and just a few used Google document (see Table 2 below).

Table 2

Students' Interactions Outside the Classroom

Media type	# of students	Frequency	Purpose
Text message & phone	17	3-19	Practice conversations
Text message only	8	2-10	Confirm dates for assignments; arrange to meet; remind each other of planned tasks & study for tests
Email	3	3-5	Post and share study tools such as "quizlet" flashcard, where and how to make flash cards online; post links to Swahili articles
Facebook	3	3	Study, make plans to meet and study; ask questions, construct and edit conversation scripts; make arrangements to meet and cook African food
Face to face	3	3	Study
Google document	2	2	Construct whole-class skit script

The results indicate that students interacted outside of classroom mainly to prepare for their graded conversations. Most students used text messaging, followed by phone, email and then Facebook, while Google document was used the least mainly for big-class projects such as constructing a skit. The assignments given to students were catalyst to encouraging interaction and collaboration with each other. Therefore, language teachers may use conversations as one way to promote teamwork among their students. In addition, teachers ought to take advantage of media by allowing students to use whatever media is available to them to enhance their learning.

Graded-Conversations Motivated Students to Use Social Media to Help Each Other Study

In addition to practicing their conversations, students felt comfortable to interact with each other regarding other assignments I assigned. They were motivated to use social media to help each other in various aspects of the class. This was apparent from their interaction logs such as the one below (see Table 3).

Table 3

Sample 2 of Student's Interaction Log

Type of media used	Date of interaction	Start time of interaction	Who I interacted with	Purpose of interaction
Face-to-face	15/06/2014	2:53 pm	My roommate, Amy	We practiced numbers when we were driving in the car and cooking dinner
Facebook	18/06/2014	9:14 am	SWAH 1010 Facebook Group	I posted a comment, "Hamjambo!" Both Bens, Kat, and Rebecca responded, "Hatujambo."
Text	20/06/2014	6:04 pm	Ben	Discussed how to say ordinal and cardinal numbers as well as the ji/ma noun class.
Phone call	24/06/2014	10:57 am	Jennifer	Discussed my Swahili class and I spoke some sentences in Swahili.
Facebook	25/06/2014	12:21 am	SWAH 1010 Facebook Group	I was craving ugali and piri piri sauce, so I posted an article on the Facebook page. Cuisine at its finest!
Google document	25/06/2014	1:00 pm	SWAH 1010 Class	Updated the document with what we came up with in class for the skit.
Google document	26/06/2014	12:30 pm	Ben	Created a Google document of our oral exam conversation so that we could edit it.
Facebook	26/06/2014	12:38 pm	Ben	Posted the Google document on Ben's Facebook page.
Text	26/06/2014	1:21 pm	Ben	Discussed our second Kiko assignment.
Text	26/06/2014	3:18 pm	Ben	Discussed our oral exam with emphasis on tenses.
Facebook	26/06/2014	4:50 pm	SWAH 1010 Facebook Group	Asked whether or not the sentence "Ninataka kuwa mwalimu" would be future tense or not. Decided it is technically both present and future tense.
Face-to-face	26/06/2014	9:08 pm	My friends, Anna and Chris	We practiced for my oral exam. They said Ben's part and I responded with my lines.

Apart from their interaction logs, their reflections made it clear that the graded-conversations played a great role in their collaborative efforts outside of class. Such reflections helped me to answer my second question: Do graded-conversations affect students' learning? If so, how? Data seem to suggest that because they had to practice their conversations, students used social media in ways that allowed them to use each other as sources of knowledge as well as reinforce and clarify content covered in class. For example, four students highlighted why they interacted outside of classroom. Ana said, "I probably would not have communicated this much outside of class if it was not for a grade but I am glad and it helped me a lot." Jennifer mentioned that the Facebook group, text messaging between classmates, and prompt e-mail responses from me helped her learning experience tremendously. Ben noted, "The assignment was very practical and it allowed us to go over our conversations, practice concepts learned in class, and double check with each other to be sure what assignments were due when." And Jacob mentioned ways in which he interacted with his fellow students to get help on assignments. He wrote, "I would say that overall, e-mailing Ret & Sam was extremely helpful when comparing answers in the homework, completing assignments, and understanding the material".

In addition to the four students highlighted above, more students underscored how the required conversations impacted their learning. They reflected on ways that the use of social media created comfortable, secure, collaborative learning environment while helping them get to know each other better, stay focused and disciplined to learn the language. Below I highlight excerpts from a few students illustrating this point. Anna wrote:

> While I was not expecting to get much out of the out-of-class interaction, I was actually both surprised and impressed by how effective it was. The thing I found most remarkable is that I have had classes with people for multiple semesters in

a row and I am not nearly as comfortable as I am talking to the people in this Swahili class that I have known for less than one month. This assignment facilitated that comfort and security; I would call it a success.

Jordan stated:

> Since there are not many opportunities to discuss and interact with others in Swahili in my typical community, I found it quite necessary to speak to my classmates in Swahili to practice the language daily. Therefore, I feel that such interactions were relevant, helpful, and rather necessary to my progress in learning Swahili.

Rebecca noted how Facebook enhanced her learning: "In my opinion, the Facebook group was the most helpful. It allowed the entire class to share their knowledge and assist each other when someone had a question or concern." Even more, Chase underscored the critical role conversations through social media impacted her learning. He stated,

> I definitely enjoyed talking with classmates outside of class. The use of Facebook was particularly practical as you can be updated in real time. Honestly, we often have a hard time staying focused outside of the classroom, but conversing with each other on facetime helped me remain engaged.

Another student added "I was able to contact my classmates by text or Facebook comfortably and I feel that you should continue to require students to have an out-of-class interaction to encourage them to talk with their peers." And James added, "I would recommend to the instructor to continue using the interaction log in the future because of the increase confidence it gave me to contact other members of the class through social media without feeling awkward about it." Therefore, it is safe to believe that with the need to practice their conversations, students felt compelled and encouraged to interact with each other outside of classroom and found social media to be a great tool to facilitate such interactions.

While more than 99 percent of the students found the out of class interaction helpful, not everyone felt so strongly about it though they didn't have any other suggestions. For example, two students expressed the fact that they both like to talk to their fellow classmates and would have done so with or without this assignment. Stella said,

> I am a people person and often talk to my classmates whenever I see them. The conversations made it easier but I am not sure they made such a big difference to me in terms of being able and willing to work with my fellow classmates. I can't say you need to stop it but for people like me, it was just natural to do it.

Thomas expressed a similar idea by noting the probability that graded-conversations made a difference but was not sure it made a big difference. He wrote,

> Grading the conversations and asking us to keep a log insured interaction, but any learning accomplished in that time (i.e. how much effort they put in to them) is still up to the students. I think the log provided a certain minimal level of what it was designed to create, but everything else was up to how involved the students chose to get. Insuring higher levels of involvement above that minimum is a hard problem, and I can offer no easy solutions.

By examining the interaction logs and reflections students provided, conversations made a positive contribution to most students learning Swahili. Students felt comfortable to interact with each other. Students were motivated to ask each other questions about specific content covered in class and they used social media to enhance their learning. Teachers therefore can be sure to get their students to work together when graded-conversations is one of the key assignments in a foreign language classroom.

Assignments Shape the Type and Quality of Students' Collaboration

Students' interaction logs and their reflections highlight three principles in fostering collaboration among students. First, teachers ought to be intentional about students' collaboration outside of class. Most students admitted that without having this assignment, they would not have interacted with each other or if they did, it would not have been as frequent as it was. This means, my decision as an instructor to put conversation and interaction-log as an assignment was one of the main reasons students did it. Even more, because the activity was rewarded, it carried a lot of weight and didn't seem an add-on or trivial work that counts for nothing or very little towards students' final grade.

Second, teachers ought to be systematic in structuring students' collaborations outside of classroom. Simply because an assignment is required, it doesn't mean it will be helpful, practical or even successful. For this to happen as it did for this class, I systematically planned the content of daily teaching to be intertwined with the type of contexts or tasks students will need to master and therefore, whatever I taught in class, students could then design conversations based on what we learned in class. Simply putting students in groups and requiring them to practice their language does not mean it will result in their growth as language learners. For example, if you teach students to learn different noun classes in Swahili and then put them in small groups to converse, you are likely to have students simply help each other to memorize subject prefixes, object markers and other structures that align with nouns from each noun class. Doing so limits the relevance for their language use in context. On the other hand, teaching students how to greet each other in Swahili and how to do it in different contexts is likely to inspire them to greet each other in Swahili once they leave class and to continue doing so even on the phone or through texting and even on Facebook.

Last, teachers need to give students flexibility to choose how to utilize media to benefit their language learning. Although I wanted students to use media or any other means, I didn't dictate the type, the time and the reason. I also didn't forbid them to interact with anyone else besides their conversation partners. Many of them ended up conversing with their moms, roommates and other friends as well. They also had the freedom to not only practice their conversation but to use it for whatever reason they deemed important regarding their learning. I believe this kind of flexibility or a sense of freedom allowed them to envision their own ways of applying the knowledge they learned and to make it fit their daily lives. Intrinsically, real learning happens when people find ways to connect what they learn with what they do. By giving students the power to choose the circumstances, reasons, means, and goals behind the use of their social media for learning purposes, I empowered them to make collaboration a part of their lives. They learned as a community of learners who came to see each other as family and therefore, felt comfortable interacting with each other beyond classroom walls.

Implications

For teachers teaching less commonly taught languages, whether it is Swahili, Yoruba, Korean and others, it is rather necessary to be intentional about how we facilitate language learning not only within the classroom but also outside school walls. The study shows students were more encouraged to collaborate with each other not only to reinforce content covered in class but also to ask each other questions. As such, many felt comfortable interacting with each other because it was part of their schoolwork, in other words, it was not weird or rather intrusive to interact since all of them knew they were supposed to do it. Even more importantly, for students who feel uncomfortable interacting in large groups, the assignments provided them with another

opportunity to be able to reap the same benefits of conversational practice just as those who are outspoken. When students are surrounded with only English and Spanish speakers in their communities, teachers ought to encourage students to become resources for each other. Other instructors often arrange for mature language learners in upper classes to converse with the ones in lower levels. However, often it is difficult to make this work as many find it hard to coordinate their diverse and complicated schedules. This approach requires little planning on the teacher and puts it entirely on students who already have one thing in common—taking the same language at the same time.

The study exemplifies ways in which students can benefit from somewhat structured but also flexible activities. As demonstrated from their interaction logs and reflections, students chose the type of media and they also used it for different purposes. Many found the assignment very practical, relevant and helpful. Although they had to do it, just looking at the interaction logs (sample 1 and sample 2), they all interacted at different levels.

Each student had the liberty to envision their own ways of applying the language in meaningful ways based on their own social cultural contexts. Hence, it is incumbent upon teachers to create language-learning activities that allow the lives of students to determine how they learn and to let them use their linguistic skills based on real life circumstances. Furthermore, none of the students sighted negative impact of this assignment based on their financial resources. If a student did not have a computer, he or she could simply use a phone. If one did not have a cell phone, he or she could simply e-mail. For those with access to multiple media platforms, they had more choices. The assignment allowed students from different social status to interact with each other in ways they could afford and felt comfortable doing so.

Conclusion

The world is changing. People are changing. Knowledge is changing. Teaching is changing. We cannot fight against change nor can we stop change. We can however, use the change to make learning better and in doing so, we honor the identities created as the world changes. In turn, we make the world a better place by simply accepting and using the changes we have. While the study shows graded-conversations motivated students to communicate with each other beyond classroom, and to use social media to help each other study, it also shows assignments shape the type and quality of students' collaboration. In all, structured assignments led students to use social media to enhance language learning. The study is a testament to possibilities available to all students learning less commonly taught languages in the Unites States and elsewhere. Teachers can use media to enhance language learning because such tools are enjoyable, practical, relevant, motivating, and affordable.

In all, it can be agreed that creating a culture of collaboration is important. It doesn't require a lot of resources. Although it may take time to make it a reality in classrooms, it doesn't take too much time, or complex technology, or even high technical expertise. In fact, it is often easy and rather straightforward to assess collaborative work. What is mostly needed is an open mind and the will to believe that students are more than able to value their learning by going the extra mile to work with each other. Teachers need to establish a philosophy of ideals that invite all students to use their strengths for the betterment of their school community. They need to be intentional about creating a class that can become like a family that believes everyone can learn from each other and with each other. In other words, collaboration is the dream that nearly every school wishes to achieve and teachers are the catalyst that can make it happen.

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