

Production-Centered Classroom Environment Increases Students' Understanding and Interest in Learning Foreign Languages

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative action research is to examine the effects of implementing the production-centered classroom design principle on students' understanding and interest in learning a critical foreign language such as Arabic. This action research took place during the spring semester of 2017 at West Chester University and included twenty-nine Arabic language students from three different learning perspectives; novice, intermediate, and advanced. For students to be centered in the classroom, they were encouraged to be independent, open minded to using technology, openly networked with peers and the community, creative in problem solving, and confident in presenting their knowledge and growth to their audience. They were also encouraged to incorporate their hobbies and interests while learning. To prepare the students to be producers in a production-centered classroom, small changes were routinely introduced into the curriculum and the related effects on the students' achievement and enthusiasm in the subject were examined and documented in order to ensure the success of the changes. The main focus of this action research project was the students' final cultural presentation. This task was used to evince that a production-centered classroom positively affects the students' learning and interest. Research indicates that a production-centered classroom positively affects student achievement and identifies that working in a production-centered classroom is a crucial element which impacts student learning and interest when learning a critical foreign language, such as Arabic.

1. Keywords: critical foreign languages such as Arabic, connected learning, production-centered classroom, openly networked, peer support, produce, hobbies and interest

2. Researcher's Background

Since immigrating to the United States and observing the fact that teaching Arabic is the most sufficient means of making a living while staying connected to a piece of my culture and positively influencing developing minds, I've driven to establish myself in the academic community and evolve my skills as an instructor. Unlike many foreign nations, the educational possibilities in the U.S. are endless; opportunities and resources are abundant and available to those seeking them out and determined. Though there are challenges that accompany teaching a critical foreign language, such as Arabic, to non-native speakers, my goal has always been to prepare my students to be lifelong learners. My classes are student-centered, and the Problem-Based-Learning (PBL) approach is the foundation of my curriculum. This avenue of teaching aids my students in assembling a multitude of effective traits including; a flexible mindset towards learning, extensive problem-solving skills, ability to pursue self-directed learning, efficiency in working collaboratively, and remaining fundamentally motivated. Educational scholar Erik Nelson defines PBL as "a student-centered instructional approach that is derived from constructivist epistemology. It is based upon ill-structured real-world problems with the goal of strengthening and developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in learners...In this environment, the role of the instructor shifts from didactic to a facilitator or tutor" (2010, p.99-114). I use this method as a tool to confront my students with real-life issues.

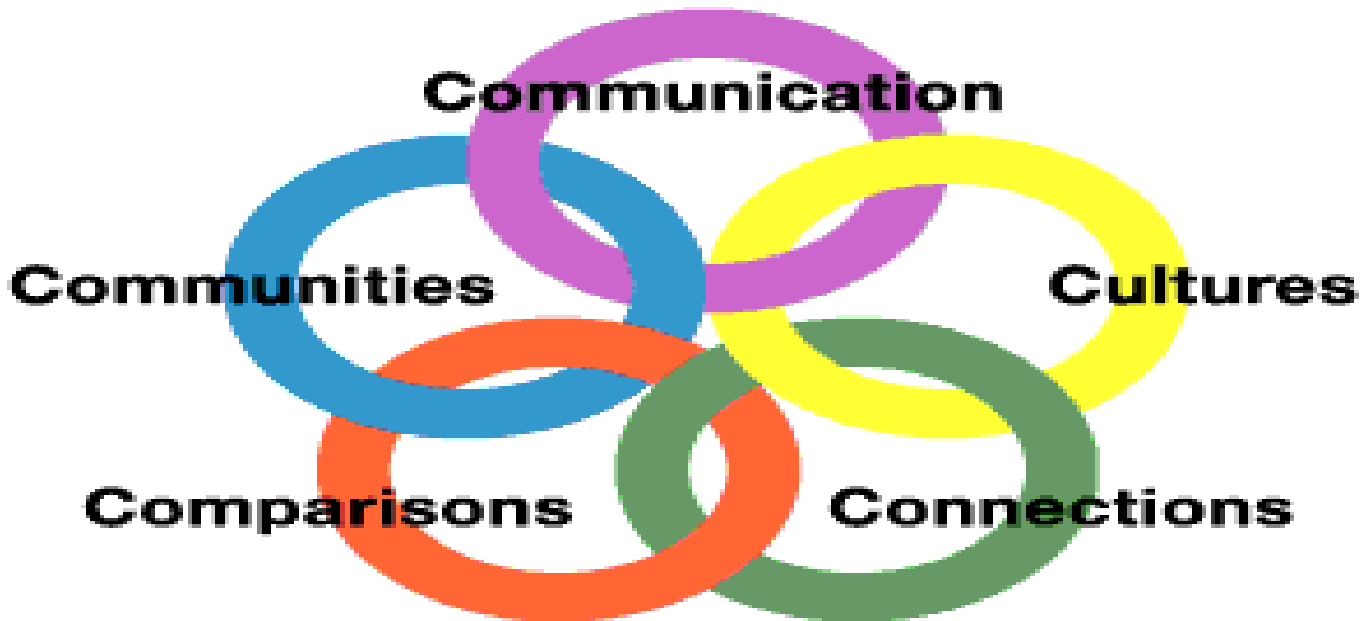
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For example, immersing them in a “live” foreign speaking exercise in which they act out that they are paying for groceries at the grocery store and realize the customer forgot his wallet. Now the students need to explain the situation to the cashier in the foreign language being studied. Such an activity really touches on the core fundamentals that make up PBL and makes a great group learning activity.

I discovered that implementing the connected learning design principles in my curriculum supports students’ learning by increasing their understanding and their interest in the language and its cultures. The most powerful principle I observed through practice is the concept of leading a production-centered classroom which provoked me to ponder the question, “Will teaching a critical language, such as Arabic, in a production-centered classroom increase the students’ understanding and interest in learning the language?”

3. Statement of the Problem

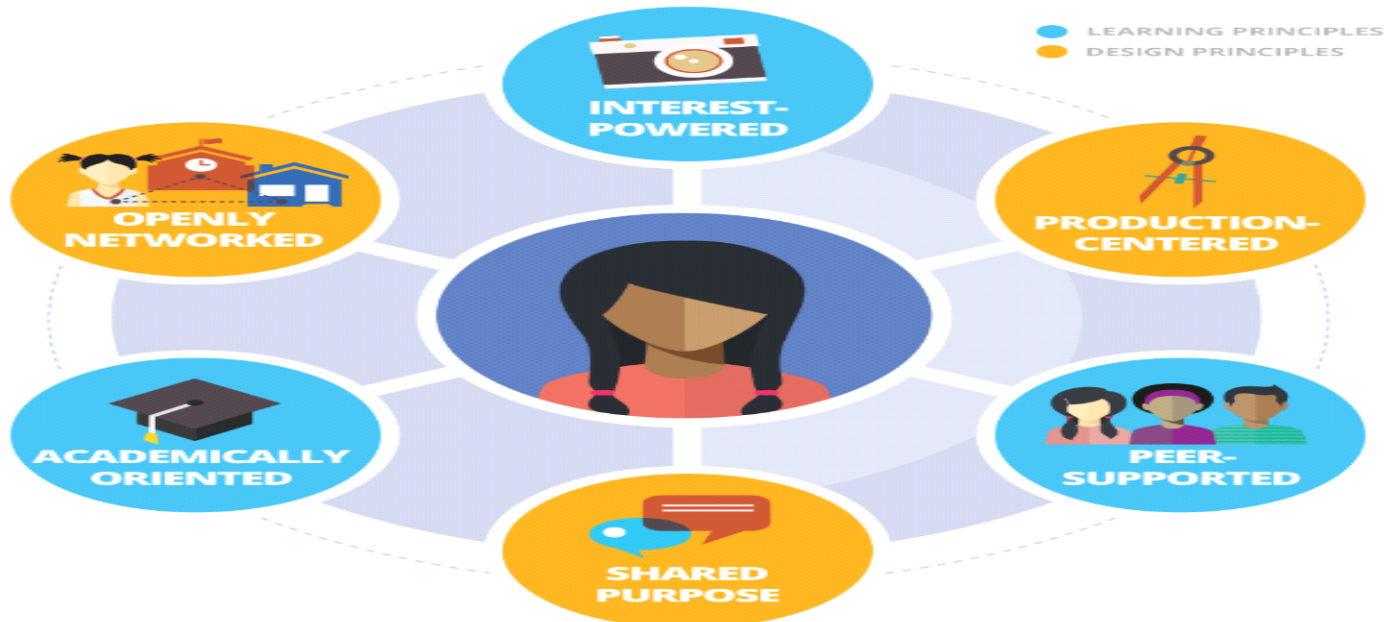
Regardless of the reasons students learn foreign languages, there are industry standards for foreign language instruction in the 21st century which educators should follow as guideline to fit every student’s needs. These standards for learning Arabic in the US were developed by the National Capital Language Resource Center, the National Standards Collaborative, the American Association of Teachers of Arabic, and the National Middle East



Language Resource Center. These standards describe the outcomes, not the curriculum, and help teachers formulate what should be taught in a language class and how. To provide the most positive learning experience for their students, instructors who teach Arabic should apply these standards in their own teaching. These ideals touch on multiple facets of teaching and are as follows; communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. As reported by Schiffrin (1994), “Communication can be characterized in many different ways.”

It is widely agreed that communication is practiced in three dimensions; Interpersonal, Interpretive, and Presentational. To apply these modes in my teaching approach, I’ve molded my classroom to be student-centered since the start of my career. Interpersonal communication has proved to be the most vital element in my classroom as direct communication between teacher/student or student/student while speaking Arabic is a very effective practice to grow proficiency and comfort with a new language. However, even while exploring communicative activities to strengthen my students’ skills, an uneasy feeling remains; there’s something missing in connecting my students to the real world outside our textbook and classroom. To mediate this gap, I evolved my curriculum and began teaching in a connected learning environment which allows students to be further linked with virtual technology and real-life circumstances. Since the spring of 2016, I have been implementing all the connected learning and design principles in my syllabus by combining them with the three communicative modes and five standards of learning the language to aid my students’ understanding and increase their interest in learning the language.

My intention for this action research is to clarify the most effective connected learning principle which allows students to maximize the potential of their education while touching on elements of the five standards for learning and communicative modes. One way to strengthen their knowledge and interest in learning this critical language is to encourage them to be makers, or in another word, to be producers in a production-centered



classroom.

The purpose of my action research is to answer the question, “Will teaching a critical foreign language, such as Arabic, in a production-centered classroom increase students’ understanding and interest in the language?”

4. Review of Literature

4.1. Teaching Arabic in the USA

Creating the standards for learning Arabic in the USA began with developing a statement of philosophy based on three core beliefs: "all students can develop competency in the Arabic language and an appreciation for Arabic culture; all students can learn; and instruction must be interactive, learner-centered, and reflect current best practices" (Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, p. 118). Communication can be characterized in many ways (Schiffrin, 1994). This approach suggested to recognize three communicative modes. “Three communicative modes are recognized in the communicative standard to place primary emphasis on the context and purpose of the communication.” (Brecht and Walton 1994)

4.2. Student-Centered and PBL Approaches: To be able to implement the production-centered classroom approach in teaching, student-centered and problem-based-learning approaches should be implemented as the foundations of teaching. According to Brown, the ultimate goal for student-centered classrooms is for students to gain independent minds and the capacity to make decisions about their life-long learning (Brown, 2008). Problem-based learning shifts the teacher’s role from dispensing information to guiding the construction of knowledge by his or her students around an initially ill-defined problem. Students refine the problem, develop research questions, and investigate the topic using a wide variety of primary source material and work out a variety of possible solutions before identifying the most reasonable answer (Johnson 2009, p. 8). Educational scholar Erik Nelson also defines PBL as "a student-centered instructional approach that is derived from constructivist epistemology...based [on] ill-structured real-world problems with the goal of strengthening and developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in learners....In this environment, the role of the instructor shifts from didactic to a facilitator or tutor." (2010, p.99-114). For the students to be producers, the challenge-based approach, a collaborative learning experience in which teachers and students work together to learn about compelling issues, propose solutions to real problems, and take action, should be implemented. This concept asks students to reflect on their learning and the impact of their actions and publish their solutions to a worldwide audience (as quoted in Johnson et al., 2009, p. 10).

4.3. Teaching in Connected Learning Environment Leads to a production-centered classroom: To teach successfully in a production-centered classroom, all connected learning design principles should be implemented to empower students learning. These “powerful design principles that engage, empower, and equip students to learn effectively, purposefully, and continuously throughout their lives” have proved to be invaluable (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016).

4.3.1. One of those principles is supported-peer learning. According to Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 2003, “The use of peer learning and mentoring in higher education environments has been established as an effective learning strategy, with students gaining confidence in their own ability and taking control of their own learning.” Peer learning is established by social constructivist theory, an ideology which expresses that knowledge and academic growth “can only mature under the guidance of or in collaboration with others” (Vygotsky, Lev, 1978). Collaborative peer learning is a means of preparing learners to become independent and actively involved in constructing knowledge for themselves and understanding how to use it (Arendale, 1993). Supporting students to progress their learning in these ways will not only produce positive academic results but also will groom lifelong learners.

4.3.2. For students to be producers in a production-centered classroom, they should be openly networked and open minded to use technology. “Openly Networked” refers to students being granted the opportunity to connect classroom learning with other aspects of living, working, or “doing” across space, time, and multiple spheres of influence or community. The use of digital technologies often makes open networking possible, because it provides incomparable access for learners across both space and time.” (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016)

4.3.3. Students in a production-centered classroom should be encouraged to “do” by trying, experimenting, and connecting what they experience in the real world to their growing knowledge in the classroom. “Doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things” (Dewey 1916).

4.3.4. Technology and digital tools should be used thoroughly to guide students in becoming producers. “Digital tools provide opportunities for producing and creating a wide variety of media, knowledge, and cultural content in experimental and active ways” (Ito et al. 2013:8)

4.3.5. For students to be producers in a production-centered classroom, they should be interested in the subject and material they are learning. Observations have shown that there are relationships between interest and knowledge (Alexander, 2003; Renninger, 2000) and that interest is connected to positive affective experience (Schiefele, 2001). According to Krapp, while some work is being done to understand how an interest changes from one form to another, much of the work has focused on the role of internal motivational processes such as basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (2002, 2005). The Human Development 2006; 49:193–224 Barron framework builds on prior studies of informal or out of school learning in recognizing the variety of literacies, practices, and forms of knowledge that are developed and employed out of school as children and their companions pursue activities of interest to them (Hull & Schultz, 2001).

5. Action Research Question

Implementing the connected learning design principles increased my students understanding and interest in learning Arabic. However, not all principles have the same effect on students’ excitement and learning. While examining the effects of all the principles on my students’ learning, I found that the most effective principle is cultivating a production-centered classroom when also supported with the other principles of connected learning. When students are tasked to follow their interest, be creative, produce, and support each other, they become very excited to learn and active both inside and outside the classroom. To test if implementing the production-centered classroom principle has a positive impact on students’ learning, I decided to examine it closer by asking the question, “Will teaching a critical foreign language, such as Arabic, in a production-centered classroom increase students’ understanding and interest in the language?” Conducting this action research will answer this question and aid in maximizing my students’ understanding and interest in learning.

6. Methods and Procedures

This action research took a place during the spring semester of 2017 at West Chester University and included twenty-nine Arabic language students from three different learning perspectives; novice, intermediate, and advanced.

The goal of this qualitative research was to examine the effect of implementing the production-centered classroom design principle on students' understanding and interest in learning. While conducting the research, I made sure that the five standards of learning languages, including the communicative modes and remaining five connected learning design principles, were employed while obtaining my results. Students were to collaborate inside and outside the classroom; synchronously and asynchronously. Technology was used as well to inspire my students to be producers. Since the beginning of the semester, I encouraged my students to be centered in the classroom, independent, open minded to using technology, openly networked with peers and the community, creative, and confident in presenting their knowledge and growth to their audience. I also asked them to incorporate their hobbies while learning, which I perceive as an important part of motivating further interest in the subject.

To prepare the students to be producers in a production-centered classroom, I took small, consecutive steps. For each move I made, I examined the success of the change. I then adjusted these changes as needed, to reach the desired outcome. As an example, to encourage students to produce in an openly-networked environment, I asked every student to share their homework with me by using Google Docs. When I assured they could do this comfortably, I asked them to watch a movie asynchronously and share their reflections in the form of comments to each other on Google Docs. However, after introducing this change to my curriculum, I quickly noticed a potential problem when examining its success. Students had the opportunity to only complete small portions of an assignment and simply copy what their peers are publishing and incorporate minor changes to make it seem original. To resolve this, I asked my students to instead work on the university's D2L platform, which does not allow for viewing and commenting on peers' submissions until after one has submitted their own original piece. This process of constantly reviewing and tweaking changes made in the classroom is vital to the success of the curriculum. In the end, this activity helped the students learn in a peer-supported, openly-networked, and production-centered environment.

The focus of this action research project was the final cultural presentation. This task will be used to evince that a production-centered classroom positively affects the students' learning and interest with a critical language such as Arabic. For this project, I gave the students freedom to choose the subject they will work on and asked them to incorporate their hobbies and interests. In this manner, they had the opportunity to explore their interests while incorporating the Arabic language and its cultures. Some students chose to work individually as there were no other students present who shared the same interests while some other students worked in groups, combining their interests for a collaborative effort. I found that students appreciated the option to work in groups or individually, as this is a personal preference and I wanted them to feel comfortable and produce to their highest ability. One of the students presented an individual project regarding Arabic dance but asked two other students to help him perform a dance he was really interested, which was "Dabkeh". The students shared their work with their peers, instructor, chairman, and some even invited other students at the school to enjoy their production.

For data collection purposes, I snapped some pictures of the students, their work, and their PowerPoints if they had any. I also conducted short written interviews by e-mails to share their feedback with me on the outcomes of the project. The interview questions were: 1- For the final cultural project you completed last semester, you were free to choose the subject you are interested to learn or further explore. Would you please write what that subject was? Why did you choose this subject for the project? Was it connected to real life aspects? Was it individualized or a group project? If it was a group project, did you work synchronously or asynchronously with your group? Why or why not? Write briefly how you prepared for the project, what type of presentation you had, and your feelings about it. Let me know if this project made a good addition to your knowledge of the Arabic language and cultures.

2- Were there any advantages of observing and participating with other students' presentations? Why or why not? What was the most effective project shared with you? What did you learn from it? Students' reactions to these answers can be found in the Appendix section.

7. Findings

After implementing new ideas and techniques into my curriculum, I found that teaching a critical foreign language in a production-centered classroom has a very positive impact on students' understanding and interest in the language, and it will cause an overall increase in students' confidence with using and producing with the language of study. The following observations were gathered during my action research, conducted in conjunction with their end-of-semester projects, all evincing the positive relationship between introducing a production-centered curriculum into the classroom and students' overall performance and interest in the subject at hand:

- All the students showed increased motivation to prepare their end-of-semester project when they were asked to incorporate their interests and hobbies.
- All the students chose subjects that are connected to the real-life aspects and cultures of the Arab world, rather than simply using the Arabic language to present a topic relating to American culture.
- All the students were open to using accessible technology tools to conduct necessary research and many did their presentations as PowerPoints to include pictures and media, rather than producing the common academic essay.
- All the students took advantage of, and benefited from, working in a peer-supported and collaborative environment.
- All the students did their best to produce their projects on a professional level.
- At the end of the semester, 80% of students from the beginner level class decided to continue studying the language. 90% of the intermediate level students have established Arabic language as a minor for their degree. In addition, two of four students from the advanced class decided to work in the Middle East and stay closely connected to the language.

The following is an array of pictures, PowerPoints, and a Quizlet as a display of students' productions and involvement in the end-of-semester project:







Please take a moment to view below projects and Quizlet study guide created by students in a connected learning environment.

[Quizlet](#)

8. Discussion



Research indicates that a production-centered classroom positively affects student achievement and identifies that working in a production-centered classroom is a crucial element which impacts student learning and interest when learning a critical foreign language, such as Arabic. Combining my research and findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

8.1. Implication 1: Giving students the freedom to follow their interests in a production-centered classroom increases the students' motivation in learning. Looking at the pictures of the students in the findings demonstrates how students are excited and motivated about their presentations; this was largely due to the fact that they were working with a topic which closely influences them.

8.2. Implication 2: In a production-centered classroom, when students follow their interest in learning they choose subjects that are connected to real life aspects which they can take advantage of in their daily life, increasing the value of their research and efforts. The students' answers to online interviews conducted after their presentations confirm this notion and can be found after this discussion section. For example, student Jacquelyn focused on culinary traditions in the Middle East and stated that, "as we both know, I love food. I felt that doing my project during the food unit of our semester was best for me. It was interesting to do something food related for a project. Focusing more on the cultural aspect of the Arab world as opposed to just the language made things even more exciting and less of a drag to complete." Similarly, student B, a professional musician, learned a song by Lebanese singer *Fairouz* and performed it for his classmates. He noted that, "the project was very relevant to my life outside of the class... I enjoyed the project very much and would love to do something similar again. I also learned a lot about Arabic music and how accessible it can be to even young Americans such as myself." When allowed to work with subjects which they naturally find appealing, students are more likely to be involved and produce high calibre work.

8.3. Implication 3: Working in a production-centered classroom helps students be open-minded to using technology which consequently creates new opportunities for them to increase their knowledge and be life-long learners. In order to produce, students need to use technology, such as Google, to do their research and collect data. They may also need to utilize technology to present their makes. PowerPoint is a very popular tool for students to use when producing; Quizlet, YouTube and other media are also very popular.

8.4. Implication 4: Working in a production-centered classroom allows students to work in a peer-supported and collaborative environment where everyone is encouraged to be opened minded to work in teams, ask for help, or help others. Findings of this research show that many of the group projects were exemplary and positively impacted all students partaking. As an example of our peer-supported environment, two students very eagerly offered to help a fellow classmate while he presented about Arabic dance culture. I observed that this made the presenter much more comfortable. The students bonded over this project and I believe they all benefited from the experience.

8.5. Implication 5: Because the openly-networked environment is very important in a production-centered classroom, students strive to produce professional, quality work in order to ensure it is worthy to be shared with others on communicative and social media platforms. This motivation to produce quality work can be found in students such as Bailey (pictured above, between two students holding her work). Student E, a very artistic student, decided to focus her project on Egyptian tourism sites and include drawings of such sites. Student E put lots of pressure on herself to ensure the information she was presenting was accurate and the art she was producing was of high quality because she would later be sharing her piece with the language department students, faculty, and staff, and online community.

The natural motivation produced by an openly-networked classroom is powerful and drives students to produce their best work.

8.6. Implication 6: An increase in students' interest in the subject language is very clear after investigating the students' future plans on what to do with the language. For WCU students, having the Arabic language minor degree are the most visible implication. This addition to their degree will allow for many more opportunities in their career. As stated before, some students opted to relocate to the Middle East and really submerge themselves in the language and the culture. I was so proud of these students' passion and desire. I believe increased interest is the most satisfying result of connected learning. As a conclusion, implementing the production-centered classroom principle approach along with the other principles of connected learning and the five standards in learning foreign languages fortifies students' learning and understanding. Now the question is how to fully evolve the standard environment of the classroom into a production-centered one.

9. Appendix

Some of the students answers of the interview questions:

9.1. Student A, very motivated and active student in the novice level class, wrote detailed reactions that proved very helpful for this action research.

9.1.1. "My final cultural project was the Arabic Meal Project. As we both know, I love food. I felt that doing my project during the food unit of our semester was best for me. It was interesting to do something food related for a project. Focusing more on the cultural aspect of the Arab world as opposed to just the language made things even more exciting and less of a drag to complete. Our project was a group project where we happened to work fairly well together. Although one student decided to do his work separately, we still all worked just as hard to complete the project in the best way we knew how. Often group projects can be tough, especially when it comes to having student who commute, students with hectic work schedules, and student athletes. With this project, we felt it was best we all went out to the grocery store together, cook together, and clean up together. To me, it was more than just cooking. We were able to work together in a way that we never have before. Completing tasks that we have never done before together. When we were first assigned the project, we began by doing some research on Arab food. We all sent each other some recipes that we found on our own. From there we planned that we would meet at my house the night before the project and that I would pick them up on campus to go to the food store. It was convenient for us to be able to use my house and it was convenient that I was able to drive all of us to the store together. We all worked on certain things while cooking but we also all helped each other at the same time. Everything went very smoothly and we all got along very well for a group project. We presented this basically by just bringing all of the delicious dishes to class and serving them to our classmates. During that class we also watched some of the Arab food etiquette video. I think this was a great learning experience not only for the students in our group, but for the whole class. It's great to learn more about the norms of the society and their culture while learning the language as well."

9.1.2." I think that there were many advantages to all of the projects. We got to learn about certain food, music, and cities in the Arab world. I feel that the food project was the most effective project that was presented, not only because it was my own project that I did a bit of research on myself, but simply because it was interesting. It was fun. Also, everyone loves food. I think that in the future maybe you could assign from the beginning of the semester that there is a specific project for each unit. Each student will only do one project with their group. Since one of the chapters was about taxis maybe someone could do a tiny presentation on how transportation works in certain Arab cities. They could compare the different types of transportation in different cities. Finally, although we had some difficulties with the group discussion posts, I think it would be great if you did them after each group's project so that students got the most out of the project as possible. In my opinion, interacting, asking questions, and commenting on presentations makes for more opportunities to learn and the discussion part of D2L makes that all fairly easy. Also, the participation on group projects for each project could be counted as a homework grade which could help students out in the long run."

9.2. Student B, a musician from The Arabic novice level class, enjoyed exploring Arabic musical culture:

9.2.1. "For my final project last semester, I chose to explore the music of the Arabic culture. I learned a song by Lebanese singer Fairouz and performed it for my classmates along with a short presentation about Arabic music. I chose to do this because I am very interested in music. As a music major and professional musician, this project was very relevant to my life outside of the class. It was an individual project.

My preparation consisted of some research and a lot of practice. I enjoyed the project very much and would love to do something similar again. I also learned a lot about Arabic music and how accessible it can be to even young Americans such as myself.”

9.2.2. “Observing and participating in my classmates' projects was incredibly beneficial. I still remember the key elements of most of my classmates' presentations. The most effective presentations were the one on food because we actually got to eat the Arabic food and experience it first hand as well as the one on Arabic homes because I still remember a lot of the information that was presented, such as the fact that most Arabic homes contain a garden and a fountain, the grandiose of which is typically a sign of the resident's wealth.”

9.3. Student C, an undergraduate student majoring in Languages & Cultures, French/Teacher ED French, shares her perspective as an advanced level student:

9.3.1. “The subjects I chose to write about were the Gaza-Israel conflict and the Arab cultures and traditions. I chose the first one because I am very compassionate about it and I want to raise awareness about what is going on in Gaza. For the second one it was part of the class assignments. They were both related to real life aspects. The first was about the struggle that Gazans live. The second one was about the life aspects of Arab people from different countries. The second project was with a group and we worked synchronically.

The way we worked for the project is that we used google docs. We all added the information we needed to complete our part. We also communicated through email to finalize everything. I would say it did add to my knowledge because I learned some new information.”

9.3.2. “There were many advantages, you can see how other students present their work and learn from them. When you participate it creates a class discussion from which all students benefit. The most effective one is the one about Arab cultures and traditions. I learned from it that even though people are from the same background and have

many things in common, they can also differ in other aspects of their lives.”

9.4. Student D, an advanced level student, dreams to be an American ambassador in the Middle east and commented as follows:

9.4.1. “For our final cultural project my class decided to focus on Arab Art in the different countries in the Middle East. Our project was a group project and each student chose a different country or region to focus on. We worked synchronously together to prepare a PowerPoint for our class and professor. We presented the PowerPoint to our professor and class. The PowerPoint consisted of videos, music and photos that explained our topics. We prepared for the project by each student doing research on their topic. Once we finished our research we all met up in the library to collaborate on a stellar PowerPoint to present. Also, we prepared by studying Arabic, the presentation had to be in Arabic. We had create and present the PowerPoint in Arabic. So, there was a lot of group meetings to make sure our grammar was correct for our presentation. This project was very informative because we learned about different arts in the Middle East. The different types of art we learned about are music, carpentry, henna, hieroglyphics and much more. This project definitely taught me a few more things about Arabic culture and language that will be instrumental in my future studies in the Arabic language.”

9.4.2. “There were advantages of observing and participating with other students' presentations because we got to test our Arabic linguistic skills by reading and listening to other people's presentations. I believe that I have developed better listening skills just from observing other presentations. Also, I believe my reading skills have strengthen too from reading other people's work on the projector screen when they present their project. The most effective project shared with me was a presentation by my fellow peer Nadia. She presented a project on Israeli-Palestinian relations and that helped me out because I received a different perspective on the situation. It taught me to look at both sides of the argument or issue, or conflict.”

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