

Organizing and Carrying Out Language Exchange Projects: Action Research Findings

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Q: What would be the ideal duration and format for a language exchange project?

A: Within the framework of action research carried out for the PELIQ-AN project, we looked at two exchange formats.

Choose the format best suited to your group

On the one hand, a format of three meetings spread over several weeks and interspersed with distance exchanges; and, on the other hand, a camp format lasting about 48 hours (two sleepovers) preceded by distance exchanges. We observed very few differences between the results obtained at the end of each type. From this we concluded that it is up to teachers to choose the format most suited to their group. In the beginning, teachers were somewhat afraid that the planning and organization of exchange projects would increase their workload, but at the end of each exchange project they stated: “We’d like to have more of the same,” “We began to feel that the young people had an aptitude for interaction,” and “We found it easier to organize and lead the encounter days.” Both teachers and their students were unanimous in affirming that they would ultimately like to have more meetings with the other group.

End on a positive note

I would like to draw your attention to a key point: the importance of ending exchange projects on a positive note. Whatever the length of exchanges, one must avoid creating negative outcomes. For example, it would probably be inadvisable to limit a twinning experience involving adolescents and preadolescents—who normally take more time to warm up to one another than do younger students—to a single day, when contacts are still marked by timidity or even anxiety, for this could produce a negative experience. Indeed, teachers have reported that sometimes “there is not much happening at the beginning” (with regard to openness to the other group). In such cases, teachers should ensure that the exchanges enable students to get beyond their initial anxiety. We have observed that students seem to move a step forward with each encounter at the start, their anxiety has to be allayed, but during the second meeting interaction becomes easier. By the third meeting, there is significant progress in terms of the ease and confidence with which the students approach one another.

Take advantage of the initial surge of enthusiasm

One teacher stressed a final key point: meetings should not be spaced too far apart; otherwise one cannot take advantage of the initial surge of enthusiasm. For example, when two meetings are set six weeks apart, it is harder for the students to start interacting all over again with the students from the other class. This problem is minimized, on the other hand, when the distance between meetings is reduced to two or three weeks.

Q: Take us through a typical day involving an exchange between two groups.

A: A typical day is relatively easy to organize. To begin with, there are ice-breaker activities to ensure that interactions are gradual and to enable the students to warm up to one another. A more complex task is planned for the morning, when students are more alert. At lunch hour, they can be left to play sports, take part in informal activities or play interactive board games. A second task is slated for the afternoon. For example, students might give a presentation on work accomplished during the morning. Then there is a closing activity. The day goes by relatively fast. When playing host to another group, you could add a tour of the school. Somewhat similar planning also applies to the camp format.

Q: How can one ensure that young people interact positively?

A: Many factors facilitate interactions among the students.

Foster interdependency

One must first of all ensure that the planned activities or tasks require students to work closely together. It is important, therefore, to plan activities in which the students need one another in order to attain their objective or complete a task. Too often, the degree of interdependence required by an activity is overestimated. One might think, for example, that a treasure hunt is an ideal activity because it requires students to form teams. But our observations have shown that there is usually a leader (or sometimes two) in each team, and they are the ones who do most of the work while the others keep somewhat off to the side. And this divide is even more pronounced if the students have even the slightest difficulty in speaking the language required for the activity. On the other hand, if the students have a sketch to do, or a song to sing in both languages, it's hard for any of them to stay in the background simply because everyone has a role to play. We observed during the creation of a poster, for example, that sometimes one person grabs the markers and does all the writing (with, at times, a second or third person helping), but there are always those individuals who hang back. We have found that archery is one of the sports least conducive to interdependence because the students' interaction is limited to taking turns shooting at the target. The activities most conducive to interdependence, on the other hand, are team sports in which students have to communicate in order to win, or activities that require them to trade information.

Gauge informal interactions

We also observed that gauging informal discussion sessions is needed to foster interactions among students. If, at the outset, students are asked to introduce themselves as an undirected activity, they quickly exhaust their store of inspiration. Moreover, this approach is more difficult and intimidating. Interactions are fostered when, on the other hand, one starts with more directed activities in which students are asked, for example, to put specific questions to one another. As the exchange process continues, time can be made for more and more informal periods in which students choose their own topics of conversation, sports, games or any other activity. There must be a progression in informal interaction.

Organize the space

The organization of the meeting space is another aspect that can facilitate interaction between both groups. Let's take, for example, the case of a team made up of four students (two from each class): if two students from the same class are seated at the same side of the table, they will be inclined to talk to one another, and this will create a sort of physical barrier between them and the students on the opposite side of the table. And if two students from the same class are seated across from one another, the same sort of barrier can be created. If, on the other hand, students from the same group are invited to form a diagonal line, with each of them placed next to a student from the other class, social interaction is fostered because there are no more barriers between the students on either side of the table.

Create teams of no more than four students.

A final aspect is linked to the number of students in a team. If there are too many students in a team, there will inevitably be some who do not speak up. If teams of from five to six members are formed, one or two participants in each team will most likely stay in the background. In teams of two, three or four members, students are required to interact more.

Q: How do you go about allaying young people's anxieties?

A: We have many means at our disposal for reducing anxiety among young people.

Preliminary discussion

It is important to manage the reluctance that students may feel upon first contact. To do so requires awareness of a basic principle that may initially seem counterintuitive: talk about elements that may be sources of anxiety. This is the same principle as the one underlying the production of vaccines: injecting a tiny dose of a virus or bacteria that causes a disease strengthens the immune system, which then becomes better equipped to fight off the illness. Likewise, involving students in early discussions of potential sources of anxiety better

prepares them to conquer this anxiety. They are prompted to find solutions for managing situations that could otherwise make them anxious. For example, if a young person says, "I'm afraid I won't understand when they speak to me in French," the teacher can ask, "What will you do if you don't understand?" The young person can then think of options. Or if the student says, "I'm afraid there'll be students with whom I won't get along," the teacher can ask, "What do you usually do when you don't get along well with someone?" Again, the student's answer will involve creating options for the new situation. In this way, students create their own solutions and their anxiety decreases. It is not a matter of downplaying situations (saying "that's not ever going to happen") or of overdramatizing and generating fear; rather, it is a matter of having students understand that these are just the kinds of things that are likely to happen when people interact, especially when they do not know one another or one another's languages. These strategies allay anxiety.

Preliminary contact at a distance

Contact prior to the first meeting is another factor that helps to reduce anxiety in young people. This can be done through letters, digital slide shows or photographs of the classroom or students. We have observed that when students chatted with their exchange twin on-line, for example, this greatly reduced anxiety and transformed it into curiosity and a desire to meet.

Ice-breaker activities

Ice-breaker activities also help to reduce anxiety, making it possible to start the day with gradual contact with the other people. Students have time to study and observe one another before initiating contact. Some ice-breaker activities lead to a variety of strategies for making contact, particularly group strategies. For example, a timid student will follow a leader—his or her friend—who initiates contact with the leader of the other group. What we have then is two small groups meeting, instead of two individuals. In some cases, I was able to observe that, after barely 20 minutes, there was a considerable reduction in the amount of anxiety felt by both teachers and students.

Finally, when planning contact or ice-breaker activities, one can try to make them amusing or likely to bring the students into closer physical contact (see the Activity Booklet).

Q: How does one ensure that activities or tasks go smoothly?

A: There are a few sure-fire strategies one can use for this purpose.

Carry out a demonstration

Teachers can demonstrate activities. If a task involves interviewing a student from the other class, the two teachers can interview one another. They might ask each other questions like the following: "Where did you go on your trip?" "What language do you speak?" "What is your favourite colour?" When teachers

demonstrate an activity, young people participate more fully, know what to do and what to expect, and are more inspired with regard to the questions they ask.

Ensure that students understand the instructions

I have also observed that, when you make sure that students have understood the instructions, activities go more smoothly. To ensure that a student has understood the instructions, the teacher can have the student repeat them in his or her own words.

Avoid lengthy delays before embarking on activities

A final element that helps activities go more smoothly is related to the preparation time required before embarking on an activity. If this time is too long, the pace is lost. I know of one case in which teachers who had been successful with other activities opted for one that involved sticking adhesive decals on their students' backs: those wearing the same sticker were to be on the same team. This preparatory activity proved to be too long, however, and the students lost their motivation. As a counter example, in one activity teachers simply distributed a sheet of paper describing some characteristics of a student—left-handed, with two sisters and more than two pets—to be identified from among his or her classmates in the other class. This maintained the students' interest.

Q: How does one manage language use?

A: The question of language is a very important point in linguistic twinning.

The teachers

First of all, it is important to convey a positive image of the use of the second language. By exchanging a few words in the two languages, even when one is to predominate during the exchange, teachers provide students with a positive model. They can also show that making mistakes is not a serious matter since we have the right to make mistakes in our second language. So if students make mistakes, it's ok; because they are there to learn, to improve. No one is expected to be perfectly bilingual before they can have conversations with people from the other linguistic group.

The students

A second element concerns the language that students are asked to use in the course of an activity or task. It is important to alternate—a complete task in French, a complete task in English, followed by a complete task involving a mix of both languages. The latter could be preceded by instructions such as: "Speak in your second language," or "Choose whichever language you want." The students must be given some down time when they can talk in their own language.

Students teach their language

Another way of managing language use, and one that works quite well (based on our observations) consists in asking young people to teach their own language to other students. In one instance, the teachers asked the students of one class to teach the students of the other class 10 words in the latter's target language during lunch time. In another instance, the teachers asked the students to teach their exchange twin a simple song. Young people are proud of teaching in their own language, and of feeling that they have helped to make it easier for their exchange twins to speak in their second language.

Q: What results can be expected from a language exchange?

A: The results that can be expected from a language exchange are more psychological than linguistic in character.

Openness

One can hardly expect to see great linguistic progress in two or three days of contact. Progress in language exchanges is measured more in terms of openness to the second language and to diversity than it is in the number of words one has learned. Both teachers and parents have pointed this out. Parents, for example, have said things like: "It was as if an obstacle had been removed; I feel as if my child now wants to learn a second language;" or "My child realized that he was good in his second language;" or "He was capable of interacting, and somewhat proud and confident as a result." Teachers, for their part, reported progress with comments like the following: "I had a young student who was shy, but she worked through it. Through interacting with others she had an opportunity to speak her second language."

Motivation

In addition, teachers and parents reported that certain young people see more clearly the relevance of learning the second language: "I'm going to need a second language, and it'll help me in communicating with members of the other group, with the people from the other school." They've gained some perspective, they say: "I'm doing it for a reason." Learning a second language makes sense to them.

Networking

Finally, one sees the results in terms of networking. Parents and teachers alike indicate that some young people stay in contact after the exchange by chatting on-line. Some parents reported that their children intended to stay in contact with their friends from the other group, for example, if the latter attended a nearby school, or if they could engage in sports activities in the neighbourhood during the summer, or meet in a park.