Activating the imagination inside the world language classroom

by Claire Mitchell

"Imagination is powerful. [...] Imagination works best when it activates emotion..." (MacIntyre & Gregersen 193)

Imagination. Creation. Innovation. These three words and their relationship with one another have powerful possibilities in education. When we tap into a learner's imagination, we are able to guide them to become creators and innovators. Specifically, inside the world language classroom, cultivating learners' imagination enables them to visualize themselves as language users, which is important if we want them to extend beyond the four walls of the classroom and see themselves from a new perspective. When learners can see themselves as language users, they take ownership of their learning experience and become more invested in and engaged with the topic being studied. This heightened sense of investment in turn leads to creation and innovation, further propelling them to use the language in new and exciting ways.

How do we elicit and nurture this type of imagination inside the classroom?

Even though eliciting learners' imagination can have positive effects in the world language classroom, the question still remains – how do we as educators create this type of imaginative environment? Considering the prominent role technology plays in the lives of learners today, an easy way to develop imagination is by using digital tools in the world language learning experience. Technology has become a way of life for learners today. From Siri on the iPhone to the new Alexa on Amazon, even our everyday tasks involve some form of technology. So why not use these resources to our advantage in world language learning? Technology use is advantageous because it provides a window into a new and unknown world, and it encourages learners to explore. But explore what exactly? What do we want learners to explore and why do we want them to do it?

Imagination and creation tied to culture

When activating learners' imagination, it needs to be tied into cultural learning so that they develop and grow in their cultural awareness. This type of awareness centers on the ability to recognize, respect, and understand cultural differences and is important in a world where people from different backgrounds connect and interact with one another more often. As noted in the ACTFL Global Position Statement, the possibility of interacting with people who speak different languages and are from different cultures increases on a daily basis. Therefore, learners must possess cultural awareness in order to be successful in today's societies that are multicultural and multilingual. A unique way to cultivate these skills from within the four walls of their world language classroom is through the use of technology, and more specifically, through social media. By using social media in the world language classroom, students begin to see a connection between how they learn a language and their worlds beyond the classroom. Furthermore, the very reason students are drawn to social media is because it offers opportunities to collaborate, connect, and interact in diverse virtual contexts.

Learners as creators and innovators on Pinterest

In my own Spanish language classroom, I used Pinterest to activate learners' imagination. Pinterest is a social media tool centered on discovery and evokes the imagination through the use of visual imagery such as photos and videos. The premise of Pinterest is that users can create pinboards that are thematic and then pin videos and images to these pinboards that represent a particular theme (Mitchell 42). Due to its inherently explorative nature, it helps learners visualize themselves in the cultural environment they are investigating because it gives them an insider's view to the culture. Pinterest provides a different viewpoint than what learners are used to because they have the opportunity to choose what interests them, investigate this topic, and see what it is like "firsthand" from within their language classroom. Another benefit of Pinterest is that it is encourages learners to work together to achieve a collective goal, which ties into learners as language users. When working together on Pinterest, they use the language not only to explore the target culture but also to achieve their goals inside the classroom (i.e., accomplishing tasks and completing activities).

Activating the imagination through Pinterest

At the university level, learners used Pinterest to explore the target culture and visualize themselves integrating into that culture (Mitchell 43). At the K-8 level, educators can use Pinterest in a number of ways as well. For example, educators can create cultural projects where learners explore specific topics such as music, art, or food via Pinterest. Learners can delve into the target culture and find specific examples of products, practices, and perspectives of the target culture. They can then pin different images and videos to pinboards created by the teacher or work in groups to create their own group pinboards that they later share with their classmates. Inside the classroom, the use of Pinterest can encourage a collaborative environment where learners lead discussions about what they found on Pinterest and how it is representative of the target culture. These types of discussions can further guide learners to see themselves as language users, which in turn empowers them to take ownership of their learning.

Typically, no matter the level of language learning, a popular topic taught, and that students enjoy learning about, centers on food. Educators can therefore use Pinterest to teach a unit on food while developing learners' imagination and cultural awareness. The original topic of the following suggested project was part of the curriculum in an introductory French course at The University of Alabama*. However, I adapt the version below by providing examples for the K-8 setting and include the use of Pinterest as a part of the project.

For the purpose of explaining this project, I highlight how to use it in a Spanish-speaking classroom, but it is important to note that this type of activity can easily be incorporated into any world language classroom. To begin, educators can set the stage for learners by telling them to imagine they are going to be on the show *MasterChef Junior* and will be making a dish that is unique to the Spanish-speaking world. Educators can either allow learners to choose the Spanish-speaking country they want to investigate or assign a country to each group. Then learners can begin their own quest for knowledge by exploring the Internet for foods that they think are interesting and that are unique to their specific Spanish-speaking country. To develop learners' linguistic knowledge, they can also write a short description in the target language about the food or write the vocabulary words on the pin of each food or dish. After the pinboards are complete, learners can then use this knowledge to complete a written activity depending on their level. For primary school, a suggested written activity centers on creating recipe cards in the target language. For older primary school and even into junior high/middle school, learners could develop a brief script that guides them later in the creation of an oral activity. The suggested oral activity for all levels could be to hold a mock *MasterChef Junior* show, create one of the foods, and have all of the classmates act as judges of different dishes. In this context, learners use their language to talk about the foods, ask questions, and use relevant linguistic and cultural knowledge to complete the activity.

Finally, in order to connect the cultural products and practices with the cultural perspectives, younger learners and teachers could work together to read about why these foods are popular and why people eat them. For older learners, they could write journals in English that discuss what they learned while investigating the target culture via Pinterest. This type of journal entry could tie the cultural products, practices, and perspectives together through guided prompts that focus on the same objective of leading learners to understand more about why these foods are popular and why people eat them.

In conclusion, using Pinterest in the world language classroom has limitless opportunities for connecting students to their learning experience and to the outside world. In particular, Pinterest provides a window into the real world and shows how people use the target language on a daily basis. By incorporating these types of activities into the classroom, learners not only grow in their linguistic development, but they also develop their global competence because they use the language in relevant and meaningful interactions that have real-life purpose.

*The original activity topic was created by Dr. Isabelle Drewelow, Assistant Professor of French and French Language Program Director for Beginning and Intermediate Instruction at The University of Alabama. Learners, who were university-level students enrolled in introductory French, imagined they were going to be on the show *Masterchef* as part of a project where they learned about different French cuisine.

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