

Nicaraguan Youth Engagement Project

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Target audience: 9th-12th grade Spanish students

Project description:

Spanish language students will communicate directly with English language learners in Nicaragua. Both sets of students will practice the language they are learning. Through engaging with another student, each set of students will learn about the another culture and country in a way that personalizes them. This project is primarily meant to be an aid to learning a language, not to take the place of a Spanish language course. Students should receive guidance, feedback and a grade for their participation in this project.

Section 1: Project purpose:

Goals of developing international citizenship:

- To counteract stereotypes about people in Latin-American
- To personalize people in Latin-American
- To learn about alternate ways of living and valuing through direct interaction with other students
- To learn and discuss how the US may be viewed differently by people in Latin-America

Cultural goals:

- To learn about a Latin-American culture through direct interaction with international peers

Language goals:

- To make Spanish language learning relevant and useful by interacting with peers who are native Spanish-speakers
- To learn new vocabulary and practice grammar in the target language
- To become aware of challenges faced by English Language Learners

Section 2: Project set-up

Establishing contact with an English language teacher in Nicaragua interested in participating may be challenging because the project requires technology time. Vast differences between Nicaraguan schools will be seen both in their technology access and the English ability of their students. Differences depend on if the school is rural, private, or if it is an international school. An international school may seem like a US school online but have mostly students native to the Nicaragua. Websites can also be a way of showing photos, video and music of people to help students get an idea of how Nicaragua is. Some helpful websites are below:

http://www.studentsoftheworld.info/schools/aff_pays.php3?CY=NIC-Nicaragua&NB=2

This website offers a few international schools that have developed websites in the Managua and Granada areas.

http://www.studentsoftheworld.info/penpals/penpal_ads.php?Pays_Choisi=NIC

This website offers one example of how pen pals can be found, but this is not suitable for a class project. It could be useful if the project would only be done by one or two students. These students would need to be advanced in their

language skills and are mature enough to do it without the feedback from a whole class to help them avoid stereotyping based on one contact.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Proyecto-Nicaragua-Global-Connections-High-School/190050987235>

This Facebook page is an example of a US/Nicaraguan improvement projects.

Facebook may be an engaging way of interacting with students but oversight is challenging and it lends itself to more informal language. Nevertheless, showing the class some Facebook pages together might give people a better idea of how some people live in a familiar and interesting format.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=oz4QSLXg68>

This YouTube video is of a marching band using some traditional instruments and drums. Questions comparing and contrasting the band with a high school band would offer an opportunity for students to do some higher-order thinking.

Section 3: Considerations when preparing your students for the project

These issues should be well-thought out before creating a lesson plan or materials to prepare students.

- 1) Prepare your students for different perspectives about the US: The instructor should read about the basic history of Nicaragua and the relationship between Nicaragua and the US. This is important to help prepare students that their perceptions of the US are not the same as views from people in other countries. Inaccurate beliefs and information about the US may be positive or negative. Incorrect positive views of the US should be corrected because they can lend themselves to negative perceptions of the US. If they think ‘every high school student in the US has a car just like in the movies’ this can lead to loaded views such as ‘high school students in the US over consume and have too much freedom and privilege.’ Negative perspectives of the US among people in the US are not as threatening or surprising to US student as negative perspectives from international students. Students in the US are more aware and understanding of negative views of the US from a US perspective. When someone in another country has a criticism it is not easily balanced out by positive views from that country because they do not have access to enough varying opinions. The views of people in another country might be based on their understanding of their country’s history with the US which many US students are not familiar with. Preparing your students for interactions is important so they are not surprised or feel personally criticized if a Nicaraguan student has a criticism of the US. It is important that they know how to disengage if there is a disagreement or conflict. Some students may not have learned these skills or how to deescalate conflict in their own lives.
- 2) Prepare your students for difficulties with language (Spanish and English): Students in a non-English-speaking country will struggle with English idioms, slang, abbreviations, sayings and ‘text-talk.’ These students may try to translate their sayings or slang into English. They also might try to use English slang, but use it incorrectly. Recommend that your students avoid these challenging issues by using standard English and by spell-checking their own correspondence before sending it.
- 3) Prepare your students for sensitive and inappropriate content or topics: Establish clear and concrete expectations for what should be communicated based on the goals of the interaction. Include parents in this discussion by sending home a letter that includes resources on how to talk to their child about how to address these issues.

Some issues may not be obviously inappropriate but in a cultural or national context could be sensitive. In Nicaragua homosexuality, abuse, mental health problems and other topics are discussed less-openly and are

more sensitive than in the US. Discussions about religion, politics and economics are common in Nicaragua. Conversations about war are more personal. Differences of opinion are tolerated and understood especially within the family. Expect Nicaraguan students to be direct and forward about what they believe and think. Their feelings and family history related to an event may be just as important or more important than the facts surrounding that event. Sometimes there is disagreement or conflict between official facts from different countries surrounding an event. How historical events between the US and Nicaragua are taught at school is also somewhat different.

- 4) Prepare students to help them make sense of the interaction: Students should be given a framework to help them understand and make sense of the interaction and to contextualize the interaction in a realistic way. This can be done by providing students with questions so they describe their Nicaraguan friend and topics they discuss. Have all your students ask a few standard topics so the class can compare notes and discuss what is shared by different Nicaraguans. These topics should be relevant and interesting to students in both countries while also revealing important differences and similarities between Nicaraguans. Examples could include goals they have in life, why they work or do not work, how their education is different from their parents, what they think about Nicaraguans who grew up outside the country, etc. Other topics could include obstacles to achievement or the importance of family versus the pull of friends.

Discuss with your students what a stereotype is, why they are problematic and how to avoid stereotyping a whole country based on the responses of one person.

Students should ask if their friend's opinions or views are representative of their families and their area. This will challenge your students to face the issue of generalizing another country. Your class should discuss generational shifts in life experiences and views.

- 5) Prepare students to meet the needs and expectations of their pen pal: Connect with the instructor of the students and make sure you know what their goals are for the interaction. They could be to improve their student's English only, but it could include improving their use of technology (typing, software, online citizenship, etc), learning about US politics, finding financial sponsorship for sports or an infinite number of other goals. Make sure the instructor understands that the communication will be shared intermittently with you and that some interesting or enlightening conversation might be shared with the class. If the interaction does not meet the needs of the Nicaraguan students or instructor, there will be less support and engagement. For instance, the amount of time a student has on a school computer might have to be split with other projects or activities that do meet the instructor's needs.
- 6) Prepare your students to understand the different goals between immediacy, completeness and accuracy: Chatting may lead to misspelled words which may make understanding more challenging but the immediacy lends itself to developing a friendship and trust. Getting back to someone with stale answers does not show engagement. Unless students are advanced, they should be encouraged to carefully prepare responses instead of chatting.
- 7) Prepare your students to use online resources: Language tools that can be found online such as Google or a Spanish urban dictionary can be fast and easy to use. Students should be taught how to use them but cautioned that these tools are not perfect and cannot always take into account the context of a word or phrase. Students should also be provided with websites and sources that offer accurate news and historical information as a reference.
- 8) Prepare your students to present the US and their culture in a balanced way: Your students will be put in the position of being a cultural guide and presenting the US to someone who has probably never been in the US, may

not have been out of Nicaragua and may have had little contact with foreigners. This will be challenging for your students even though they are experts on their own cultural background and experiences in the US. Students need to explain things they might assume are common international knowledge such as how Halloween is celebrated in the US. They will need to provide a balanced view of the US. For instance, they could say that some people in their class think one thing about a serious current issue and other students think another while others haven't made up their minds.

Section 4: Lesson plans

Introducing the project: Ask students to discuss the benefits of having a friend in an international country. What would be some of the challenges?

Discuss the goals and expectations of the project:

Establishing a friendship : Asking simple questions may be necessary for students who struggle with their English or if their Spanish is weak. They should start with topics that they are prepared to discuss because of their Spanish preparation such as traveling, sports or food. Later they can discuss topics that they have less vocabulary for (such as cultural events), topics that are more controversial (such as politics), or discuss the topics in more depth (such as favorite sports to watch in the Olympics).

Students should avoid asking one-word or yes-or-no questions. These questions are easy to write, but not interesting to respond. It is not challenging to understand the responses, but usually the questions are unintentionally set up with a cultural bias. An open-ended question provides for more interesting cultural engagement. If students do not know how to answer a question, they should be encouraged to get back to their friend after trying to provide a brief answer and say you will get back to them. They will need to be trained in using simple phrases so they can do this.

Contacts: Communication with between US and Nicaraguan students should be at least once a week. Your students should maintain a log (dates contacted/topics discussed/questions to get back about) along with a list of new Spanish words they encountered with their meanings.

Every student should have a set schedule for when they need to communicate with their friend. The friend should be aware of this schedule to keep them both accountable.

Every interaction should be about half in English and half in Spanish. This will challenge the vocabulary of both people and stretch their abilities without putting the majority of the burden on the student who has the best language ability in the other's language.

Adapting the project for advanced language students: To make it more challenging and more engaging, advanced students could do chatting, live/video chat, more challenging topics such as current events, discuss an article online they have both read or they could help a student who is struggling with their correspondence.

Adapting the project for lower level language students: To make it less challenging for lower students, they could communicate in a way that allows them more time to prepare responses and to prepare for interaction. They may need more teacher assistance or two lower students could work together. Simple tasks such as creating a grid of favorite pastimes and asking the Nicaraguan friend to survey their classmates about it would make for an easy to use, but still representative sample of youth in Nicaragua.

Section 5: Evaluation of students

Students should write an essay about their experience.

Essay assessment questions:

- How were the goals of this project met?
- What were your favorite and least favorite parts?
- What is the main thing you took from this experience?

Students should also choose two of the following questions to reflect on and write about.

- How are the lives of students in Nicaragua the same and/or different from your life?
- How has your perception of Nicaragua changed during this project?
- Would you like to continue staying in contact with your friend? Why or why not?
- What have you learned about how young people in Nicaragua view the US?
- How has your view of the US, yourself and your culture changed during this project?

After reading their submissions, lead a class discussion about the outcomes of the project and how it could be done better next time. Some topics for discussion can be found in the section below.

Section 6: Teacher self-evaluation

Evaluating a multidimensional project such as this is challenging. This is necessary to make improvements for the next time. Talk to the instructor in Nicaragua to assess the outcomes of the project and to discuss changes for the project in the future. Discuss what impact the interaction has had on the Nicaraguan students.

Teacher reflections:

- How did students' perceptions about youth in a Latin-American country change over the course of the project?
- How did their views of Nicaragua develop over time?
- How do students view their lives in comparison with those of students in Nicaragua?
- How would the project have been different if it was with a different kind of school in Nicaragua such as a private, international, rural, small or large school?
- What positive and negative outcomes were unexpected?
- How can students be better prepared in the future for this project?
- What changes to the project will increase student satisfaction with the project?
- What feedback did you receive from parents about the project?

Determine if this project met its goals of personalizing the people in Nicaragua, practicing Spanish, learning about being a better international citizen and motivating students to be engaged globally.