

The Need for Flexible Seating in the Foreign Language Classroom

Sandra F. Tanahashi

Abstract

The foreign language classroom needs to be furnished with flexible seating to accommodate a wide range of teaching styles. If there are seating options, the teacher can more easily use cooperative learning activities, which are more effective than traditional activities in motivating students and showing students that language is a means of communication and not only a subject for memorization. Line Exercise, a highly structured, quick paced exercise is one effective cooperative learning activity. This exercise requires students to stand and move between partners. Movement in the classroom has been found to stimulate brain activity and, hence, learning.

Within an institution of higher learning there are many different types of classrooms. They vary in size and how they are equipped. The vast majority of classrooms merely need to provide a board for the teacher to write on, and a place for students to sit and take notes. Some classrooms, however, need to be specialized to better help the students. Examples of these classrooms include tiered, bleacher style seating in large lecture halls; and science classrooms equipped with lab tables, sinks and gas outlets. Music classrooms need soundproofing and instrument storage areas. Art classrooms need abundant natural lighting. It is my contention that foreign language classrooms also need to be specialized.

Some may say that foreign language classrooms already are specialized in the form of the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) rooms. These rooms have grown in popularity so that they are now viewed as a necessity on any campus that offers foreign language. Unfortunately CALL rooms are expensive to set up, require teachers to have additional training before use, have limited access and emphasize student-computer, nonverbal interaction. Indeed, it is the traditional classroom itself that needs to be specialized.

Many schools have been quick to update the technology in the classroom. They offer teachers the use of Internet, DVD, CD, video, OHP and a microphone as standard equipment. My suggestion, however, is to improve a fundamental need that is consistently ignored, inexpensive to acquire, and requires no training at all – flexible seating.

With one glance at a classroom, an experienced teacher can tell you what kind of class takes place in that room. This is because the layout of a classroom has a direct impact on what kind of instruction can take place in a classroom. Whether a classroom has regimented rows of desks, is filled with sofas and computer workstations, or contains spaciouly arranged tablet arm chairs—the layout tells us much about how teaching occurs and how learning takes place.

According to Atherton (2005), there are four basic non-specialized classroom layouts. Each of these encourages or inhibits certain kinds of interaction and thus the types of learning that can occur. (See Figures 1-4.)

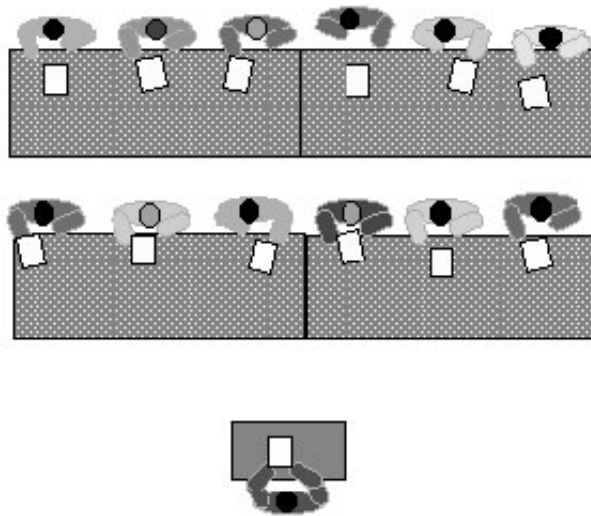


Figure 1. Type 1: The traditional lecture-style classroom arrangement

Type 1 is the traditional lecture-style classroom arrangement. The regimented rows of desks in this traditional classroom layout work best with lectures or passive learning – the teacher speaks and the students listen and take notes. The teacher can make eye contact with all of the students to keep them engaged; however, students cannot easily make eye contact with each other. To do so they would have to twist to their sides or behind them. Therefore, in this arrangement communication tends to be one way: teacher to student.

A major flaw in this type of seating is that it allows the more passive students to hide in the back row and in difficult to access middle rows where it is more problematic for the teacher to monitor their work. Richards points out that this type of traditional classroom has an “action zone” – an area located in the center front of the room where students who participate most tend to sit. Groups that fall outside this zone will often be less engaged. This problem can be somewhat alleviated if the teacher walks around to talk from various spots in the room during the lesson. When students are in close proximity to the teacher, they are more inclined to stay

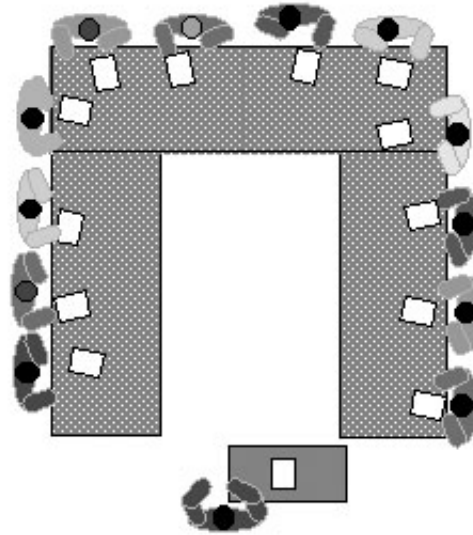


Figure 2. Type 2: U-shaped seating

engaged. (Richards p. 93)

Type 2 layout is U-shaped seating. This works well for whole-group discussions as the students can make eye contact just as easily with other students as they can with the teacher. Some twisting and turning, however, is still necessary. The biggest demerit to this type of seating is that it will not accommodate as many students as the traditional classroom.

Type 3 layout is modular seating where 3-5 students work around one table. This allows

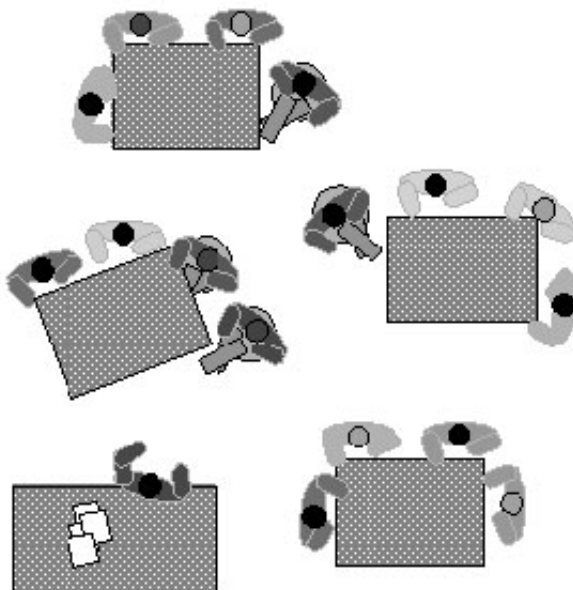


Figure 3. Type 3: Modular seating



Figure 4. Type 4: Circular or “Fishbowl” seating

students in the group to easily make eye contact with one another and offers them some autonomy from the rest of the class. Although it is more difficult for the teacher to speak to the whole class in this layout, communicating on an individual or group basis is easier.

The fourth type of classroom layout is circular or a “fishbowl” – a circular pattern of desks with an inner and outer circle forming rows. The arrangement allows for the easiest student-student and teacher-student interaction. Sitting in this arrangement, students tend to participate in conversations more readily, albeit for shorter periods (Clark 2000). Having only chairs, however, can make students feel quite insecure as they are accustomed to having a desk to hide behind. (Clark). To solve this problem, the classroom should be furnished with individual desks, such as sled-based desk chairs or tablet arm chairs, that can be moved easily. (See Figure 5.)

The ideal classroom is, however, not any one of the above mentioned four types – it is all of



Figure 5. Sled-based Chair Desk

Tablet Arm Chair

them. Different teaching methods are achieved more easily with a certain layout. A flexible classroom will allow the teacher to arrange the seating in the manner that best suits the lesson plan. Without flexible seating some teaching methods are compromised while others have to be totally abandoned. The classroom “does not create the ideal learning space but it enables or disables the teacher in their approach to create it (Horne 1998, p.210).”

In a survey done by Horne, only 3 of 11 teachers were satisfied with their classrooms. The others were dissatisfied or had mixed feelings. Teacher satisfaction does not necessarily lead to student learning, but satisfied teachers are better teachers (Gifford 1987).

Lack of Flexibility

In a report commissioned by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, researchers found that from the teachers’ perspectives the most important factor in school design was the size and flexibility of the classroom. To achieve this flexibility the report recommends that stand alone furniture be chosen so that it can be arranged in different groupings. Specifically they recommended tablet arm chairs (Nielsen 2004, p.22). Thus the classroom can be adapted to provide for a range of teaching activities and lesson types. A well designed learning environment will enhance the teacher’s ability to deliver the curriculum. The Nielsen report points out that while classroom design is not the main contributing factor in enhancing learning outcomes, a poorly designed learning environment will detract from learning. (Nielsen)



Photograph 1. This is an example of an inflexible classroom. Though there is seating for 72 students, the aisle between rows is barely wide enough to allow two students to sidle past each other. The close proximity of the benches to the tables makes it impossible for students to stand and address the class. There is no open space at the sides or back of the classroom for the teacher to walk around to monitor students sitting on the outer perimeter. No open space also means there is no place to move unused desks and benches, and no possibility of changing the seating arrangement.

In Japan, the majority of foreign language classrooms are the traditional lecture-style classrooms. Perhaps because it is Japan where space is the ultimate luxury, the classrooms are often crammed with desks and chairs to accommodate as many students as possible. (See Photograph 1) Providing maximum seating, however, restricts movement and does not allow any flexibility in the seating arrangement. Moreover, in Japan the desks are usually designed for three students so that if there is space to maneuver the desks into different seating arrangements, they are so bulky and heavy that it isn't worth the time and effort it takes to move them. In the worst cases, seating is secured to the floor.

The most frustrating aspect is that the overly abundant seating is rarely required. Case in point is the classroom pictured in Photograph 1. This is a typical classroom used for ESL classes, among other subjects, at one of the most highly regarded universities in Japan. It has three rows of 3-person desks, with eight desks in each row. In other words, it seats 72 people. However, it is not unusual to have fewer than twenty students in such a room.



Photograph 2. This is an example of a flexible classroom. The desks, though not for individuals, are on castors and there is substantial open space so that the tables and chairs can be maneuvered into various seating arrangements or to have students stand and interact.

Why the Need for a Flexible Classroom

Educational reforms have played with classroom design throughout the history of public education. At the turn of the 20th century, educators devised the Lancasterian system, using bleacher-style seating and sloped floors to aid in the teacher's supervision of the classroom. By the 1920's, however, today's rectangular classrooms had become almost universal. They have remained so, with the exception of the open classrooms used in some schools in the 1970s (Tyack and Cuban 1995, chapter 1). The latest move to reevaluate classroom design began as educators started to view learning as an active process of engagement. The flexible classrooms

that are designed today are based on research supporting the idea that students learn best when learning is active and student-centered rather than passive and teacher-centered. (Butin 1)

Educational theorist Susan Wolff found that in addition to more student-centered learning that current literature indicated a need for changing learning expectations to prepare students for the changing roles and responsibilities in work, family and community for the 21st century. She found that cooperative, project-based learning was identified as a pedagogy that prepares learners for these new expectations by “conceiving, developing, and implementing projects relevant to the learners’ needs.” (Wolff, p.3) Through collaborative and project-based education students have a means to learn critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, negotiation skills, uses for technology, and how to take responsibility for their own learning. In 2002 Wolff conducted a study on design features of the physical learning environment that support and enhance cooperative, project-based learning at the community college level. She found that all of the participants stated the need for flexibility in spaces used for cooperative and project based learning, i.e. the classrooms. (Wolff 2002)

The reasons for using cooperative learning in the foreign language classroom are many fold. Overall, however, it is cooperative learning that shows students first hand that language is a means of communication and not merely a subject for memorization. By interacting in the target language, students see that they have the ability to communicate using the vocabulary and sentence structures that they have learned. Students vocabulary and speech patterns are reinforced by classmates, speakers that the students are comfortable with, giving the students more confidence in their communicative abilities, thus more motivation to use that language.

Ideally foreign language students should speak with a native speaker in class, but in the classroom there is usually only one native speaker, the teacher. It is because of the teacher's limited time and accessibility that students need to work with each other in the target language. By using structured cooperative learning techniques the teacher can use class time most effectively.

Slavin (1995) studied cooperative learning to try and uncover why it is so successful. He concluded that the reason cooperative learning succeeds as an education methodology is its use of convergent tasks: Group goals based on the individual responsibility of all group members leads to increased learning achievement, regardless of the subject or the proficiency level of the students involved. By gaining experience through cooperative learning activities students gradually work their way closer to fluency.

What you can do if you have a Flexible Classroom

Dr. Spencer Kagan's studies on cooperative learning have led to the design of dozens of structured exercises for the classroom. In the Summer 2002 version of his online magazine, Kagan puts forth the following comparison of three classrooms (Kagan 2002).

Classroom A Traditional. To promote content and language learning the teacher asks questions of the whole class, students raise their hands to be called on, and when called on by the teacher, they respond. We peek into Classroom A during a vocabulary lesson. The teacher asks, "Who can tell me some of the items we find in the produce section of the market?"

Classroom B Group Work. To promote content and language learning the teacher in Classroom B has students sit in groups of four and interact. We peek into Classroom B during the same vocabulary lesson. The teacher gives groups a directive, "In your groups talk it over. What are some of the items we find in the produce section of the market?"

Classroom C Kagan Structures. The teacher in Classroom C knows and uses a range of Kagan Structures. That is, to promote content and language learning Teacher C, like Teacher B, has students sitting in groups of four and often calls for interaction in groups. There is a critical difference, though. The interaction of students in Classroom C is highly structured Kagan Structures. We peek into Classroom C during the same vocabulary lesson. The teacher gives groups a directive: "In your groups, turn to your 'shoulder partner' and do a *RallyRobin*. Take turns naming some of the items we find in the produce section of the market."

Kagan then goes on to explain why classrooms A and B fail, and Classroom C succeeds.

Classroom A is exquisitely designed to have students fall through the cracks. Juan is in Classroom A. He knows the names of some produce items, but does not dare raise his hand. He knows there are other students who are more fluent than he is and he does not want to risk the embarrassment of speaking out before the whole class. In his culture, it is not the norm to compete, to put them themselves in front of others. He is also a bit shy. Given this, he finds it much easier to simply not raise his hand. Because he is not participating, after a time his mind drifts to other things. Soon he is not learning any new content or language.

In **Classroom B** Juan is in a group of four students. In his group there are two students who are more fluent than he is, so again he sits back and lets them take over. Sometimes during group discussions he does not say a word, and again, not participating, his mind drifts to other things.

When Juan is placed in **Classroom C**, he becomes engaged. His partner names an item and then it is his turn. Juan is hesitant, but his partner patiently waits. When he names an item his partner smiles. Each time it is his turn he gets encouragement and support from his partner and is able to name a number of items. Further, because he is engaged, he listens to the items his partner is naming and is learning both content and language.

Though Kagan has described the classroom situations well, there are also reasons for Classroom C to fail. Let's say that Juan didn't complete his homework for any myriad of

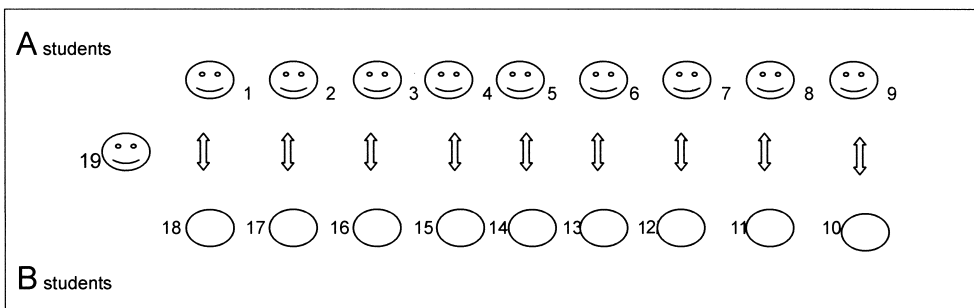


Figure 6. The beginning arrangement for a Line Exercise for 19 students.

reasons and has no idea what “produce” is. To make matters worse, there is an odd number of students in the class and Juan has no partner! What now? Well, *if* you have a flexible classroom, have the students move their desks aside and stand in two rows facing each other for a **Line Exercise**. This is a highly structured, quickly paced speaking exercise that gives the students the opportunity to speak with multiple partners. For this exercise, each person stands in front of their partner with a piece of paper and a pencil to record the answers and the names of the partners they work with – the writing helps to reinforce the new vocabulary kinetically and visually. The student without a partner, Student 19, stands on the end. (See Figure 6.)

To begin the Line Exercise have the A students ask the B students the question of the day. In this case it is, “Can you tell me one item we find in the produce section of the market?” For a Line Exercise the question should ask for a single item so that the exercise is kept at a brisk pace and to allow other students to supply new items. B students need to answer in a complete sentence. Two appropriate answers would be: “Yes, we find cabbage in the produce section of the market”; or, “No, I’m sorry I don’t know.” A students then write down the name of their B student partner, and one or two words to remember their answer. Then the roles are reversed. Once the B students have recorded their partners’ names and responses, it is time to rotate to a new partner. After the rotation, Student 19 becomes an A student, Student 18 stands at the end of the line to observe and wait, and everyone else has a new partner. (See Figure 7.) It is

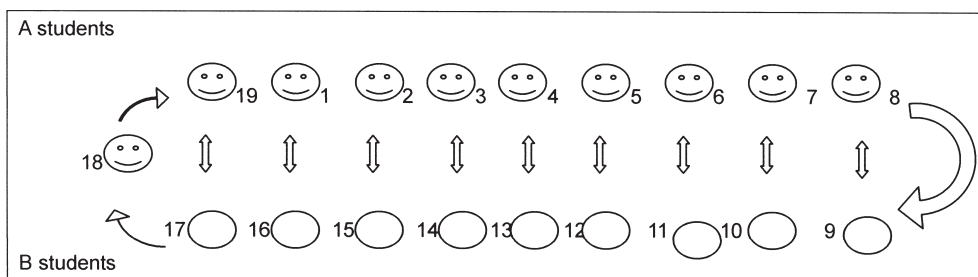


Figure 7. The Line Exercise arrangement for 19 students after the first rotation.

important to have students rotate to a new student as soon as about one-fourth to one-third of the students have finished. If you wait until most of them have finished, the pace will slow down instead of quicken or stay at the same pace, as it should.

This time if a student answers with an item that is already on their partner's list, the partner needs to ask for a different item, thus expanding their list and vocabulary. When A and B students have both asked and recorded their answers, it is time to rotate again. For this class of 19 students, an odd number of students, the group can be rotated 18 times, allowing each student to speak with every other student. Please note that even though each student is only moving one place at a time, they will skip one student and speak with the second one down the line as they rotate. When there are an even number of students, each student will only speak with the even or the odd students, but not both, so the exercise can only be done half as many times before students are speaking with the same person again.

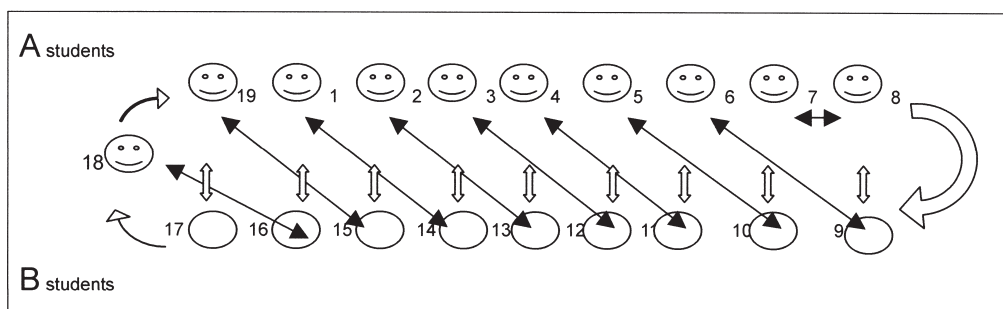


Figure 8. The Line Exercise arrangement just before the second rotation. The black arrows indicate who the new partner will be. Note that with each rotation one student is skipped and the second person to the left is the new partner. This skipping of a person often confuses students (and teachers) the first time.

Line Exercises are an excellent way to reinforce vocabulary and language patterns in beginning level through upper intermediate level students. The exercises can be as easy as exchanging a greeting, and “How are you?” or as difficult as exchanging opinions on political reform – it is completely at the teacher’s discretion.

One of the added benefits of Line Exercises is that they act to bond the class together. Everyone works with everyone else at essentially the same pace. Unpopular students can not be avoided, shy students have to participate, and boys have to talk with girls. Students are given no options in their partners and no time to worry about it.

It is standing and moving, however, that may be one of the key reasons that this exercise works so well. Students have more energy and more momentum when they are standing. Indeed, there have been studies confirming that physical activity alone and its sensory effects develop, maintain and strengthen synapses in the brain (Breithecker 2006).

Most teachers associate quiet and disciplined sitting with learning and see movement as disruptive. However, Breithecker (2006), a doctor of sports medicine and kinesiology, has found that this commonly held opinion is not valid. Instead his research shows that if a body is inactive for a long period, that brain activity is reduced. He states that “static-passive sitting has a long-term negative effect on a student’s ability to concentrate.” (Breithecker p.4) He recommends that teachers use ergo-dynamic solutions, which encourage dynamic and productive active learning. Line Exercises are one such activity.

Conclusion

Today in schools across Japan, including colleges, teaching students how to sit still at their desks is part of a hidden curriculum. Movement, however, makes learning more varied and thus more interesting. Through movement, students’ eagerness to learn and their learning performance can be increased, especially when that need for movement is channeled into highly structured cooperative learning activities like Line Exercises.

Unfortunately, classrooms rarely give students room to stand and interact. Instead they are filled with inflexible seating arrangements that teachers must learn to work with despite what would be best for their teaching methods.

Though a more in-depth analysis of the direct relationship between student learning and the classroom environment needs to be conducted, this author would be very pleased if schools would reexamine any classroom furnishings they are planning to purchase. How many students will fit into one classroom is not the only criteria that needs to be considered. The foreign language classroom needs to be a flexible environment that is capable of handling the diverse teaching methods that teachers bring to their students.

Bibliography

- Apple, Matthew T. (2006) “Language Learning Theories and Cooperative Learning Techniques in the EFL Classroom”. *Doshisha Studies in Language and Culture*. Accessed: 21 July 2007.
http://elib.doshisha.ac.jp/cgi-bin/retrieve/sr_detail.cgi?U_CHARSET=utf-8&CGILANG=japanese&ID=TB10211363&SUNO=&HTMLFILE=sr_sform.html&SRC_BODY=1&PID=&CHILD=
- Atherton, J. S. (2005) *Teaching and Learning: Physical Layout*. Accessed: 13 July 2007.
<http://www.learningandteaching.info/teaching/layout.htm>.
- Breithecker, D. (2006) “Beware of the Sitting Trap in Learning and Schooling - ‘Ergo-dynamic’ concepts are decisive”. Accessed: 9 September 2007.
<http://www.designshare.com/index.php/articles/sitting-trap/>
- Butin, Dan (2000) “Classrooms.” *National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities*. Accessed: 27 August 2007. <http://www.edfacilities.org/pubs/classrooms.pdf>
- Clark, Don (2000) “Training Room Design”. Accessed: 13 July 2007.

<http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/seating.html>

- Gifford, Robert (1987) *Environmental psychology - principles and practice*. Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Newton, Massachusetts.
- Horne, Sandra C. (1998) "Shared visions? Architects and teachers perceptions on the design of classroom environments". Accessed: 16 September 2007.
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/cd/research/idater/downloads98/horne98.pdf>
- Locker, Frank M., Steven Olson (2003) "Flexible School Facilities". Accessed: 13 September 2007.
<http://www.designshare.com/index.php/articles/flexible-school-facilities/>
- Long, Michael H., Patricia A. Porter (1985) "Group Work, Interlanguage Talk, and Second Language Acquisition". *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol.19 No.2 June pp.207-228.
- Nielsen, A.C. ed. (2004) *Best Practice in School Design*. Report commissioned for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand. Accessed: 23 August 2007.
<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=10367&data=1>
- Richards, Jan (2006) "Setting the Stage for Student Engagement" Accessed: 3 September 2007.
<http://www.kdp.org/archives/files/kdprecord/RW06%20Richards.pdf>
- Slavin, R. (1995) *Cooperative Learning* (2nd Edition). Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon.
- Tyack, David and Larry Cuban (1995) *Tinkering Towards Utopia*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wolff, Susan J. (2002) "Design Features for Project-Based Learning." Accessed on July 10, 2007.
http://www.designshare.com/Research/Wolff/Wolff_DesignShare_3_7_02.pdf
- Young, Dolly J. (1991) "Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom environment: What Does Language Anxiety Research Suggest?". *The Modern Language Journal* Vol.75, No.4 pp.426-439.