My Dream Class: How I Would Like My Spanish Class to Be

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In my dream Spanish class, students are engaged and not afraid to participate or to ask a question, taking an active role in their learning process; they come prepared to class and ready to perform, using technology for learning, not as a distraction, and they learn through different disciplines. Students learn language in context and have time to practice what they are learning both in mechanical and also in creative ways, they have a number of activities that reinforce and promote not only the accurate learning of vocabulary and grammar, but also culture in the widest sense of this term, because learning a foreign language is not only learning another language, but also another way of living. Students experience what the Spanish speaking world has to offer to them and they see that learning Spanish is useful in their lives. They learn to collaborate, joining efforts and knowledge for the common good; they help each other learn. Students understand that learning a language takes more than just coming to class and completing all the assignments and exams, they understand that learning a language also implies taking an active role outside the classroom, grasping every opportunity to improve their competence and become citizens of the world; students engage in community services where they interact with people with different backgrounds to learn more about them and their languages and cultures. In sum, my students become lifetime learners. In my dream class, I teach students, not just a language.

However, we all know it is not an easy task to help students achieve competency in a foreign language and there are many reasons that make our mission more of a dream than a reality. On one hand, especially at the college level, we have a limited amount of time to spend in class with our students. On the other hand, it seems to me that the message that society is sending to our students, is that what matters is the grade. This is creating a generation of test
takers, whose main motivation is not to learn, but to do well on a test, to complete an academic requirement and be over and done with it. Grades translate into diplomas, and diplomas into jobs. However, something is being neglected here: the true ability to communicate in a foreign language with sufficient competency and also the self growth that sprouts from the appreciation of the cultural component that should never be dissociated from the linguistic one.

So, what can be done about all this? First, I think that we need to find new ways of utilizing our time in the classroom. For example, the flipped classroom model is a very promising alternative to traditional ways of learning. We also need to promote students' participation in class and involvement in their own learning, I want my students to know that I value participation and I take it as seriously as tests; and that not only it weighs a substantial percentage in their final grade, but it is also key to their progress: you can only learn to speak a language by speaking it. Students must understand that learning a language is like learning to swim, you jump in the pool or the ocean and swim, and it does not happen overnight, it needs constant effort and progress through time. If we cannot convince our students that there is more to it than just completing a requirement, we will have failed.

As we know, language should be learned in context to foster communication and show a practical purpose. Therefore, I like to present the material in ways that reflect communication and also include visual stimulation: pictures, dialogues, video-clips, etc. Often, textbooks introduce vocabulary in the opening pages of each lesson or chapter with lists of words with little or no context at all. I would like to see this vocabulary presented in a more contextualized manner. This makes learning realistic and, therefore, the practice should be as realistic as possible too. If, for example, I ask students to role play as clients and clerks in a shopping center, the situation has to mimic the real world: students should use authentic materials, bring clothing
to the classroom to simulate a real situation, use price and size tags, pay with simulated currency, and be aware of cultural differences and patterns of conduct involved in the situation. It is very important that these activities have a significant weight in the students' final grade. As much as I want my students to be able to read and write appropriately, I want them to be able to communicate orally with accuracy, to be competent through the probably most useful channel for them: the spoken language. I can give them dialogues as models, but then they should create their own dialogues and be able to go beyond standardized situations into more personalized interactions, which not only promote creativity, but also free students from stereotypical settings and patterns.

As one of my colleagues pointed out to me, opportunities for *spontaneous conversations* in the classroom play an important role in promoting informal conversational skills as it often happens in real life conversations. The majority of what students say during classroom time has been planned or written prior to speaking. Whereas this is important in developing their writing skills, it often leaves students in a state of panic when language is used in real life communication. Spontaneous conversations allow students to "speak on demand", practice circumlocution, and push their language skills to a higher level by using their new language into actual conversations. This type of activity can be done with something as simple as showing a picture and asking the students to express their opinion on it, to make up a story about what might be happening or what will happen next. They can also comment on a video, or speak about a random topic.

My ideal classroom would be equipped with technology that will help students maximize their learning through a variety of applications. The Internet provides a universe of resources for practice, research and interaction with other users; it opens a window to the world and can
virtually transport students to another country where they can experience a piece of life or a cultural manifestation. For instance, we can use the internet to make a virtual visit to a museum and make an appointment with a guide so students can interact with the guide and ask him or her questions.

In addition to working with the short clips that come with the educational programs or that can be found on the internet, I like having my students watch films in Spanish and complete questionnaires; but instead of having questions just based on the story, I also like to include questions that deal with cultural aspects present in the films, and then have students express their reactions to those cultural aspects. Furthermore, I like to foster their creativity with questions that allow students to give alternative endings to the movies ("the director's cut"). Students' answers could be submitted to the teacher or posted in blog or thread format (e.g. using Blackboard) for everyone to contribute their opinions. Also we can give students articles in newsfeeds containing authentic, up-to-date materials to attract students' interest, and then, after reading, students will be able to write and post, developing also their writing skills. I believe here we can be more flexible in regard to correcting mistakes, so students can express themselves more freely.

I would also like to see students practicing and using their language skills beyond the classroom. One activity that has been often assigned consists in having students interviewing in person some Spanish speaking members of their family or community. However, this might be difficult at times, and here, again, the internet provides us with multiple resources. There are programs like TalkAbroad, which for a fee, allow students to pick a speaking partner from countries where the target language is spoken and have an appointment time to speak with them. I could give a topic and instructions or may allow the speakers to choose their own topic. The conversation could be recorded for both my students and myself to review and assess, and it can
be recorded again with the same or other speaking partner to improve the conversation. This type of activity provides students with real life experiences that not only enrich their language skills, but also their knowledge about many aspects pertaining to the countries and communities that speak the target language. After their conversation, my students might have a written assignment expressing their impressions and what they learned during their speaking experience; then they can submit it or report it to the class. Skype can also be used for similar purposes. And we also need programs that offer pen-pal interaction to develop reading and writing skills.

With Google Earth Tours I can have students engage in a virtual field trip to a Spanish speaking country. For example, they can go on a "virtual study abroad" and find a place and a program of study, buy a ticket from an airline, find lodging, restaurants and activities to do, use public transportation, visit museums, shopping malls, etc. Students can give a rational for their selections and they can include pictures, short clips, restaurant menus, write short descriptions of the places, include prices in the local currency and figure out the conversion to dollars.

Traditionally, students learn in learning centers and then they play or do other activities outside these centers. However, this difference between formal and informal education is blurring its boundaries, and we can have students learn while they have fun. One way to do this is through immersive games, in which students can role play as characters in a foreign speaking country and interact with locals, attend a foreign university, live with a host family, bargain at a local market, find directions to a place, buy train tickets to travel locally, exchange currency at a local bank, etc. Students use the language in survival mode and develop their life skills, and it is an excellent opportunity for those students who do not have the opportunity to travel abroad. Another fun activity is to have students sing Spanish songs using, for example, a karaoke on
Youtube. Not everyone will be comfortable singing in a foreign language, or even singing at all, but there is always someone who leads, and then others join in a choral way.

So technology and the internet have their place in foreign language learning. However, in my dream class there is also plenty of physical interaction. Students are provided with opportunities to interact in class with each other and with the teacher, to work individually as well as in pairs or group work, to work on projects and presentations together, to collaborate both electronically and physically, learning from each other and contributing to improve our world. Yes, my students use technology and the internet to benefit themselves, but they also learn in many other ways, like interacting with someone in their community who speaks Spanish, going to a Spanish restaurant and grabbing a menu, attending a Hispanic celebration, joining an organization or club and engaging in community service, documenting their experience with pictures, short clips, etc. And, hopefully, my students will engage in the ultimate experience: spend some time in a Spanish speaking country; for example, through one of the Study Abroad Programs, where everything comes together and students really discover the usefulness of learning a language, not only for professional purposes, but for entertainment too.

An additional question that I would like to address is that of the placement tests. It is desirable that students enter a language course with a similar knowledge of Spanish. In this regard, I think it is necessary to implement placement tests that are as accurate and useful as possible to place students into their corresponding language levels. We can always move a student or two from one level into another, but when there are no placement tests or these are weak, the task becomes overwhelming and not only makes our job more difficult, but it is also detrimental to the students themselves.
In regard to textbooks and other learning resources developed by educational companies, I believe that material should be more customized towards their age and interests, not only to the knowledge and competence level of the students (I find some of the exercises not much suitable for my students’ age in general). And the online programs that come with the textbooks should be more flexible in regard to mistake correction (when a student enters a synonym, the program does not recognize it and marks it wrong). My other concern is the price. I understand the companies need to make money, but asking a student to buy books and materials at high prices for all their classes could be an economic burden difficult to support.

Finally, I would like to see more recognition from society for our profession; not only economically, but also in other ways that dignify us. Teachers are important. Not only are we responsible for helping our students learn in meaningful and eclectic ways; we are also responsible for guiding them, enabling them to find ways to learn on their own, and preparing them for continuous learning. We are a source of culture ourselves, and with our presence can demonstrate cultural aspects so subtle as physical space and body language. I believe and hope that if politicians, the media and parents are more appreciative of our job, students will also have more respect for us and for education in general, which will positively impact their learning.