

Connecting to Content

Geraldine Finazzo and Lori Langer de Ramirez present an interdisciplinary model for teaching language, culture and content in the World Language classroom

Throughout history, philosophers have struggled over

the question: What is knowledge? If we examine curriculum and the study of school knowledge through the lenses of race, class, gender and power we might add three more important questions: Whose knowledge is it?, Why this knowledge?, and Who benefits from it? These questions reveal the non-neutral nature of schooling. Classrooms are political places where what is not taught is just as important as what is included in the curriculum.

In the communicative language classroom, we strive to connect the practice of specific language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading and writing) to interesting and culturally appropriate contexts. We avoid teaching the conjugations of the imperfect tense, for example, through isolated lists of verbs and rules. We aim to connect grammatical infor-

mation to situations and communicative purposes that are authentic and meaningful. In an ideal situation, we go a step further by wedding the skills and practice to an interesting and culturally relevant reading, listening activity, or project. Ideally, language, culture, and content (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2005) are three ever-present dimensions to our lessons. We do not teach a language class per se, but rather an interdisciplinary course about art, music, history, math and science through the medium of our language.

Choosing which language structures to teach is easy. We all have a fair sense of the tenses and even vocabulary to include on any given level of language study. Textbooks all contain very similar scope and sequence charts that give teachers a good overview of the grammar and structures that might fall into a Level 2 Spanish class, for example.

José Martí, Guantanamo, and the Subjunctive Mood

Teaching can often feel like an insurmountable task, especially when approaching the subjunctive mood in a second language. I am fortunate to work in a district where there is great support of all the staff, and teachers are able to be very creative in their teaching in lieu of following a prescribed lesson plan or reading a script. My level 3 Spanish Regents class had been studying José Martí, his beautiful “Versos Sencillos,” and the various traditional and modern versions of “Guantanamo.” We had recently finished a cultural unit on Celia Cruz and Tito Puente with the command forms woven into the various lessons in order to prepare students for studying the subjunctive mood.

I employ various multi-sensory and “hands on” approaches in my daily teaching, thanks to my experiences as a Bilingual Special Education teacher for the NYC Public Schools. For example, the students work on scrambled sentences in which sentences on a large blue pocket chart are cut up and placed out of sequence. Students then work on arranging the pieces to create an appropriate sentence. Upon arranging the sentence correctly, I ask various questions to elicit meaning for both concrete and abstract ideas. Students also listened to a native speaker read “Versos Sencillos” and then answered comprehension questions based on what they had heard. As a culminating activity, the students were assigned partners and each pair received a 5”x 8” card with two sentences from “Versos Sencillos.” I modeled the activity by using previously taught expressions. These expressions were then linked with new situations that required the use of the subjunctive mood. The majority of the students were able to change the verb in the sentence to the subjunctive - some needing more modeling from me and from each other. Upon completing the paired activity, students sat in a circle and each pair shared their original sentence and then shared the sentence that employed the subjunctive mood. It was truly a pleasure to watch this activity unfold, since we had spent approximately two weeks building up to this point.

Our state education departments often provide practitioners with clear guides to themes, topics, benchmarks and standards for our teaching. Often school districts will have curriculum maps or documents that dictate the structures to be addressed - sometimes even the time frame or order in which to address them. But choosing the cultural knowledge and the content to go along with the language is more often a personal choice - often based on the experiences and tastes of the teacher. How do we determine whose knowledge to include in our lessons?

When we attempt to teach the “cultures” goal of the ACTFL Standards (2006), we tend to focus on cultural products, since these often come to mind easily. We are quick to share music, food or show examples of art from the target culture. But practices and perspectives are often harder to relate to, especially since many teachers are non-native speakers of the

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