

# Bullfighting for Beginners

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**Synopsis:** Bullfighting might be a controversial topic, but it can be so much more to a Spanish teacher. The world of the bulls can enhance our students' point of view as well as their vocabulary.

To many Americans, the study of Spanish or travel to Spain conjures up images of flamenco dancing and bullfighting. But while dancing is considered fun and cultural, bullfighting has become a very controversial topic in recent years. In popular American media in the last decade, it has appeared in music videos as well as in graphic reality TV program clips. The fighting of bulls has been portrayed as being anything from artistic to cruel and everything in between. However, Spanish teachers are not new to controversy: immigration issues, Spanish versions of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” bilingual education, etc. Most of these topics make for good discussions or even debates in our classes. However, some teachers shy away from teaching about bullfighting. I propose that it is a valid topic for our classrooms precisely because it is controversial and for other reasons as well.

As language teachers, we consider ourselves promoters of vocabulary acquisition. Whether you consider “learning language in context” a buzz phrase or a “must-have” in your classroom, bullfighting lends itself ideally to this modality. There are many Spanish words used in the world of the bulls that do not translate well or exactly into English. Once students have identified the essence of the meaning of these vocabulary words, they are able to use them correctly whether they are 11<sup>th</sup> graders in a Spanish-only discussion or 7<sup>th</sup> graders using Spanglish. As one could imagine, depending on the lesson and outcomes you have in mind, pre-teaching the vocabulary is key.

LOTE teachers thrive on getting their students to think outside the box, think globally, and make connections with people and places in other parts of the world. When our students are able to relate to others around the globe, they develop an ability to empathize with other cultures. We stress acceptance, tolerance, and a recognition of stereotypes. When our kids can do this, they develop another point of view through which to see the world. Whether or not the teacher and the students are *aficionados* or strongly dislike the idea of bullfighting, the topic lends itself well to a development of this new lens through which to view another culture.

### **What It Is and What It Isn't**

When a teacher decides to embark on a bullfighting unit, it is important to do his or her homework. Regardless of whether the students are for or against the issue, they will be intrigued and ask lots of questions. There are numerous resources out there—books, Web sites, blogs, newsgroups, magazines, and videos—so educate yourself on the facts first.

There are several different types of events involving bulls. It is extremely important to know the difference while doing the background reading or especially if you attend an event and experience it firsthand.

*La Corrida*: a professional bullfight that follows a strict order of the three stages of bullfighting, also known as *los tercios*. Los tercios consist of a *picador* (man on horseback with one long spear), *el bandillero* (man on foot with shorter spears/*banderillas* who places them two at a time), *el matador* (the main bullfighter for that particular bull who will do intricate cape work, then finish the bull with a sword). Bulls are fully grown and generally between three and five years old. Matadors have taken their *alternativa* and are therefore professional bullfighters.

*La Novillada*: a bullfight in which the fighters are not professional but up-and-coming young adults who are trying to make a go of it. Some are better than others. The bulls are not fully grown, usually one to two years old. The bullfights advertised as “sin picadores” or “sin caballos” means that the bull will not be stuck with the long spear during the 1<sup>st</sup> *tercio*. This is generally not a good pick for a first bullfight experience or for tourists.

*El Rejoneo*: A bullfight with all three *tercios*, but the whole thing is performed on horseback. The *matador* is in this case referred to as a *rejoneador*.

*La Capea*: Not a standard bullfight with *tercios*. This is an event usually seen during a town's festival time. It is put on for the locals to participate in bull events. The location can be anywhere from an actual bullring, to a private ranch, to a town square. These are bloodless events involving smaller animal, usually cows, not bulls. When the animal tires, they bring out a different one. Capes are not required. Some people use their shirts; others just try to outrun the animal. Although professionals may be on hand to supervise, they are not the main protagonists. These events can be just as dangerous as the professional version because the participants may not have any knowledge of typical bull behavior.

It is important to note that some of what has been portrayed on TV as bullfighting is not actual bullfighting at all, nor is it condoned by folks in the *mundo del toreo*.

### **How to Teach?**

How to teach a bullfighting unit depends on the age level of the students, the teacher's objectives, any previous knowledge the students might have from other study units, and your individual teaching.

An introductory unit to a beginning-level/middle-school class with limited Spanish might be only cultural in nature with some key Spanish vocabulary words mixed in. The class and ensuing discussions would be conducted mostly in English. Pertinent objectives for this unit would include students being able to identify the three *tercios* and issues concerning the purchasing of a ticket to a bullfight. Visuals are very effective at this level. Consider getting some authentic bullfight posters (*carteles*) or video clips.

Middle-level units do very well if they are project based. Because the understanding of this very cultural spectacle may take some processing time, a compare/contrast type project works well. The teacher should determine the following ahead of time: individual or pairs/group work, written or visual components, whether or not there will be a class presentation in English or Spanish, and how many comparisons there should be. My recommendation is to encourage students to think of one specific event/activity in American culture that is similar and one that is different.

Teaching an upper-level unit on bullfighting is where it can get very interesting. At this point our students have very diverse ideas and opinions. After teaching key vocabulary and giving information on both sides of the bullfight controversy, this topic lends itself well to a classroom debate, *en español, claro!* Arguments should be factual in nature and ample time should be given for research and collaboration. It can get a tad more challenging if the teacher assigns which side of the argument the students are on or has them draw sides randomly. Planned correctly, it can be a unit that covers both NYS LOTE standards (communication and culture) and all four language functions (socializing, providing information, expressing opinions/feelings, and persuasion).

### **Educating Our Students**

Teachers strive to make the most of their students' time in school. We want to produce well-rounded students with critical thinking and decision-making skills. As language professionals, we also want them to be open to new ideas, linguistically functional, and able to work with others from around the globe. Because we stress diversity, tolerance, and empathy, we want them to walk in someone else's cultural shoes. It may not be politically correct and might be considered by some as a taboo subject for classrooms, but bullfighting is informative, effective, and a very relevant theme that can help accomplish goals in your LOTE class.