

## **Use All Your Creative Tools for an Effective Learning Environment**

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### **Introduction**

Classroom compositions are constantly changing. Whether you've been teaching for ten years or two years, you can see that students increasingly come to us from different cultures, speak different languages and, of course, have different experiences in their homes. As a consequence, they possess a wider range of diverse abilities and talents. With this in mind, it has become even more important to adapt our lesson plans to get students ready to learn more effectively.

If you start with the premise that you are responsible to "teach children" in a standard lecture setting, virtually all contemporary theorists believe that you will "lose" many eager minds along the way. Your pre-described methodology may or may not resonate with them. Why take that chance?

To be successful, the teaching of any educational process needs to start with the appropriate internal mindset. It's your "plan of attack," and it needs to be uniquely yours! My experience has shown that if eager young minds can learn from a variety of stimuli set in a structured, yet flexible, classroom environment, the children's level of engagement will be significantly increased.

All children are unique, and we must celebrate and embrace their differences in the classroom. Using the best of a variety of creative approaches benefits today's diverse learners, but instructional tools must be carefully and intentionally adapted to accommodate individual learners. Only in this way will all students have an opportunity for success.

So how does this work in a language-learning environment? For me, it is a well-planned, structured class setting, using a variety of different learning activities in which the individual is moving through many different media stimuli along with peer interactions throughout the session. I have come to realize the importance of such activities and know not only how important planning and implementing these activities are, but also the importance of planning activities that promote a heightened intensity of engagement that requires every learner to actively engage in language use.

### **Activities**

You may find helpful some of the activities I have successfully implemented in my own daily classroom routine:

**Palabra del Día:** Upon entering the classroom, students read the “Word of the Day” and fill out a ticket with their names and what the target language word of the day means in English. The students then drop their tickets into a fishbowl, take their seats, and wait for the bell to ring to start class. Once the bell rings, I ask whether someone is willing to read the word of the day in the target language. A volunteer then translates that word and uses it in a sentence in the target language. I then choose a ticket out of the fishbowl. The first ticket to be drawn with the correct answer is the winner for that day. Their prize is a peso (see “Peso” section below). This process gives the student immediate notification to “get ready,” and yet your learner sees it as a competition and, more importantly, fun!

**Structure, Structure, Structure!:** The key to having a well-organized, structured classroom learning environment is having the students self-regulate and participate actively in the classroom environment (with oversight, of course). After the Palabra del Día, the winner for that day is in charge of setting up the class calendar. The student will read the calendar in the

target language and, for an extra peso, I may ask about the weather, types of things they like to do in that weather, etc. The idea here is to promote as much normal conversation in the target language as possible. I find my students enjoy their “sense of control” over the classroom environment, and as a consequence, participation increases dramatically.

**Hagan Ahora:** Almost all classrooms now have a “Do Now” to get students started. Many times, a “Do Now” will be a few short questions to serve as a review of the previous lesson as well as a launching point for the next lesson. My suggestion is to keep the “Do Now” fairly simple and use more review, versus new, material. For example, use a basic question, joke, or riddle as the “Do Now” to pinpoint exactly what you are looking to review, as well as to open the floor to all learners. If it is a joke in the target language, ask the students to identify a certain part of speech; or have a simple sentence starter with a word box to help complete the sentence appropriately. Many educators will find this to be a simplified form of a “Do Now,” but I like a more simplified version so that I can grab the attention of all my students with an easy question. Students who feel successful within the first few minutes of class are likely to stay more engaged throughout the whole lesson. There’s nothing worse than losing a student by the “Do Now”!

**Kernel:** Here is where the basic lesson of the day is conducted. Try to stay away from many repetition-based lessons, and try to create activities around what skill(s) you want the students to experience. Many times, it can be a stations lesson, a tiered lesson, or a game in which students work in cooperative groups to achieve a specific goal. Remember, the key idea here is to make learning more student-centered and the teacher more of a facilitator. “A good teacher has been defined as one who makes himself progressively unnecessary” (Thomas J. Carruthers).

**Pesos:** My classroom runs on a peso reward system. I have paper pesos that I use to promote student achievement. For example, a peso will be awarded to the Palabra del Día winner. Pesos are attached to tests and quizzes that receive a grade of 90 percent or better. Pesos can then be exchanged for prizes (homework passes, etc.) that the students can purchase on Fridays when I open La Tienda (the store) during the last few minutes of class. Whether it is a peso or some other form of reward system, remember that this type of praise for good work comes with benefits—the students now have something tangible to work toward and the pesos can even be used to include a basic culture lesson in foreign currency—two lessons for the price of one!

**Wrap-Up:** Always end each class with some form of wrap-up. It may be a simple question that you want answered on a post-it to be put on the door as the students leave. Sometimes, I just ask for opinions. What was your favorite activity? What did you find the most difficult/easy? The idea here is to keep students actively engaged from the beginning to the end of the lesson. The goal is to create a classroom environment that embraces the exchange of ideas and experiences and is open to new ideas. It allows students to take ownership of their thoughts and beliefs and take pride in their decisions. I urge you to listen carefully to their suggestions and adopt ideas where feasible. When students are allowed to express their opinions, yet be open to the ideas of others, they are really empowered in their own education and progress.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes” (Confucius). In addition to learning from our own mistakes and experiences, it is important to be able to see new things within experiences we are encountering at that moment.

By being able to look at something with new eyes, we are really able to appreciate and understand the differences that make our students truly unique.

Educators and students alike must train their senses to take in experiences. Real learning takes place when an individual sees the different sides of an issue and then filters that information through his/her own experiences to interpret what he/she is seeing. Only then are new experiences grasped and true learning achieved. We owe it to our students to create this type of environment filled with meaningful experiences to fully allow every learner to reach his/her maximum potential in learning a language. These skills are important not only in the classroom, but in life. Believe me, your students will thank you for it!