



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## *A Cultural and Linguistic Exchange*

Although a Spanish language class for adults and a community college class of general studies (reading assistance and English) may seem to have little in common, I put the two together for a unique learning experience. I approached my Spanish-speaking general studies students with the idea of being "guest speakers" one evening in my Spanish class in a nearby community. The idea was enthusiastically received although I offered no pay, no extra credit, and no fringe benefits of any sort.

Once the idea was approved by my Spanish-speaking students, I developed a basic outline so they would have some guidelines for their talk, although I made it clear that the outline was only a guide. In the outline, I suggested they touch on the following topics: a description of their place of birth and surrounding area; a description of their family, along with their interests and hobbies; reasons for immigrating to the United States; their first impression of this country; and comparisons between their hometown and Woodland. Finally, I asked them to comment on their efforts to learn English and to offer suggestions to the students learning Spanish. We then met several times after our regularly-scheduled class time to discuss the procedure we would follow in the Spanish class.

The students who were enrolled in my Spanish class were also prepared for the encounter. They were given a copy of the same outline one week before the presentations so they would be familiar with the type of material to be presented in class. We had a lesson on interrogatives in Spanish, as well as a review of the verbs most likely to be used in the presentations. We also practiced preparing questions; and the students were asked to prepare several questions, of a general or personal nature, for each speaker.



On the night of the exchange, I divided the class into five groups of four to five students each. Each guest speaker was assigned to a group. As the purpose of the session was to promote an exchange of ideas, I encouraged students to ask questions at any time, to change

the subject if they so desired, or to let the conversation take its natural course. While the groups talked, I circulated among them, spending a few minutes at a time with each, answering questions if they were directed at me, but basically trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible. I had anticipated "being needed" to furnish vocabulary in Spanish, but found that the guest speakers easily assumed the role of teacher, and I became superfluous. After approximately 15 minutes, I had the guest speakers switch to another group and repeat the process. This was no easy feat since the groups were invariably involved in enthusiastic discussions. Each group spoke with three students in a one-and-one-half-hour class. At the end of the class, we reconvened as one large group and spent 10 minutes "reviewing" what was learned about each speaker and highlighting what information the students found most interesting.

Besides being a fun activity, the strategy produced several beneficial outcomes—some expected, others a surprise. For the students enrolled in the Spanish class, it was an opportunity to have firsthand contact with native Spanish-speakers. They were not only able to practice their auditory and oral skills, but they were also exposed to various accents and diverse vocabulary in the form of regionalisms. They learned about various Spanish-speaking countries—Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. They learned firsthand from these students what it is like to live in a foreign country (the United States) and the difficulties they encounter in attempting to assimilate into a fast-paced technological society, while possessing limited English skills.

The general studies students also benefited from the experience. As many of these students, due to their limited English, tend to be somewhat shy in class and at times self-deprecating concerning their abilities and progress, I was concerned that they might not feel competent enough to lead small groups of students, even in their native language. However, they were so well received that they immediately showed self-assurance in taking on a professorial role with the small groups. This newly-found confidence seemed to carry over into their work in our general studies class. They



became more vocal in class and more willing to ask questions and seek help after class, and I saw a reduction in the self-deprecating comments.

To my surprise, the students were not the only ones to benefit from this exercise. Through my eavesdropping on the groups, I learned a great deal of personal info about my students. This insight into their background and familial situations helped me to understand and empathize with problems some of them were having in class. One student's frequent absences were not due to lack of interest, as I had suspected, but rather to pressure by his family to work more hours in their Mexican restaurant. Another student's apparent apathy in class had nothing to do with disliking school, but rather with her despondence over the breakup with a boyfriend. Students may not be willing to divulge such personal information to a teacher, but they had no problem discussing it with other students and did not seem to mind that I might "overhear" it.



This cultural and linguistic exchange can easily be used in any language class, providing that native speakers are available and willing to participate. Even if the class teaches a language not as common as Spanish, students will often know someone who speaks the language being studied, or have a relative fluent in the language who may be willing to come to the class as guest speaker. If only one speaker is available at a time, a variation on the small group technique can be used. The lone speaker can present a short talk to the whole class in his/her native language, and the students can be prepared to ask questions. But in order to maximize contact among students and the speaker, and in order for "real" communication to take place, students should break into small groups after the presentation. In their groups they can review among themselves the material covered in the presentation, as well as clarify any misunderstanding, or lack of understanding, they may have. There will always be a student in the group who understands more than the others and is willing to share this knowledge. While the groups are in progress, the guest speaker and the teacher can circulate among them to answer questions.

Other than the obvious benefits of increased communication across cultures, many stereotypes can be dispelled by having face-to-face encounters with speakers of other languages. Students come to realize, as they communicate in a common language, that although we bring different cultural experiences with us into adulthood, there are obvious commonalities

across cultures that allow us to see that we are not so different after all.

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*Suanne D. Rousche, Editor*

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