



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR STAFF AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (NISOD)  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

## *ESL and Spanish Class: A Fruitful Collaboration*

True multilingual and multicultural communication occurs when real people gather together and talk. As instructors, we regularly facilitate this with ESL/ENL and Spanish language classes meeting together for a language exchange. Ultimately, more than language is shared in this collaboration of teachers and students. In fact, we have found that the activity is so successful that the students do not want to stop!

### **Facilitation**

We hold the language exchange for one hour, three times per quarter. The hour is half-English and half-Spanish. We generally start with Spanish, as that tends to empower the Hispanic students, who have the upper hand, so to speak, in linguistic knowledge. The non-Spanish-speaking ESL/ENL students are sometimes separated until the English-only time begins, working with the teacher or an aide. At other times, they stay, and American students volunteer to speak English with them for the whole hour.

It is important to explain in advance what we are going to do. We tell students that it is a good opportunity to practice the language they are learning as well as to help the other class practice theirs. The students then prepare questions as a basis from which to start.

The small groups within the combined classes vary in size, depending on how many students show up (especially in the adult ESL classes). Generally, there are three to five students per group. The students tend to form their own groups, although a certain amount of direction by the instructors is helpful. The groups are mixed in age, gender, and ethnicity. The teachers circulate to eavesdrop or to help out.

The prepared activities can be used throughout the exchange, or they can be a springboard to other communication. Questionnaires created in previous classes can be on set topics, including personal information or interests, cultural traditions, or questions about work. Music can be used, too. Holiday music, such as Christmas carols in either language, is useful, of course. Traditional or modern songs can be taught. Often students depart from the "script," but since the main focus of the event is communication, we are generally not too concerned.

As follow-up activities, the teachers may have their students write about the experience in a journal or other composition. Students can write to each other if their language skills are not too far apart developmentally. It is important for students to see this as more than just a break in the routine and that it is still a learning activity.

### **Pedagogy**

What are the actual language benefits of this exchange? There are many.

Grammar can be approached by assigning specific grammar points. Obviously, making questions is one. These can include present, past, and future tenses; information; and yes/no questions. Then, of course, the students have to answer them!

Vocabulary development is another area. This is a functional item that can be prepared in advance. For example, one visit could have the topic of employment, another could be cultural traditions, and another could be hobbies. The students would be learning the appropriate vocabulary for conversing on the particular topics.

Pronunciation is related here, too. The students are very pleased to help each other. They see the struggles that others have forming the sounds correctly. The questions and songs are also good for pronunciation practice.

Communication strategies are a large part of this activity. Often it is a struggle, but it is a productive struggle. Students have to learn or develop conversation starters; they have to remember to use polite requests, such as "Please speak slowly" or "Como se dice...?"; they develop strategies for circumlocution or restatement; they learn similarities or differences in body language; and they become adept at drawing pictures. The main point is that they are communicating.

Finally, although the preparations are guided by the teachers, the activity is student-centered. During the exchange, students are in control. Occasionally, they ask for help in vocabulary or pronunciation, but once the students are seated in their groups, the teachers stand back. It's wonderful to see. Some students stick



---

to the script, while others go off on their own topics, but everyone is engaged in communication.

### **Social and Cultural Benefits**

These language exchanges are like dropping a rock into a pond; the ripples keep spreading. First of all, there is an environment of camaraderie and empathy because all students are sharing the experience of being frustrated, yet excited, language learners. It is certainly an equalizing experience, as outside social differences are minimized in this protected environment. This is especially important for the ESL students, as they tend to be more disempowered outside the class.

As the students communicate, they develop an appreciation of other cultures. Stereotypes are eroded. Both groups experience actual native-speaker input and are introduced to different dialects or accents.

Often, the class exchanges have led to further activities between the students. Some students have become class aides, tutors, or conversational partners. Some Americans have helped ESL students get their children into Headstart or helped with insurance problems. Other students help each other with their homework. Others become friends.

For the instructors, this is a wonderful activity for interdisciplinary contacts. During the preparation and the actual class exchange, teachers have ample opportunities to exchange ideas, techniques, and suggestions. The instructors share a sense of professional concern and development, as well as concern for their students.

### **Problems**

Although this exchange is an easy and exciting activity, there are some problems. ESL/ENL classes often include non-Hispanic students. An aide can work with them in another room or in a corner of the room, or they can work with American students in English for the whole hour.

Shy students in either class can be a problem. However, they are usually absorbed into a group and, ultimately, attempt to use the language.

Miscues among men and women can also be a problem. Body language can be problematic; hand signals or sounds can be misunderstood. However, turning the problem into a topic for discussion can help solve it.

There are other smaller problems, too. Sometimes the classroom is too small for the students. In this case, the exchange could happen outside, in another room, or be divided into two rooms. Some students complain about the noise level when everyone is busy talking, but unless the group is divided or outside, this will remain a problem.

### **Conclusion**

Generally, the benefits of the exchange far outweigh its problems. Both groups really enjoy this activity. The room is full of smiles and laughter as students share the struggle of actively communicating. Both groups learn not to fear the "strangeness" of the other, they develop an appreciation of the other culture(s), and sometimes they form new friendships. It is an easy, rewarding opportunity for real language use, real language learning, and for real empowerment of students.

*Molly Farquharson, Instructor, Developmental Education*  
*Aurora Porter, Instructor, Developmental Education*

For further information, contact the authors at Mt. Hood Community College, 26000 E. Stark Street, Gresham, OR 97030.