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Statement of Teaching Philosophy: “Teaching Spanish as More Than a Communicative Instrument.”

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Since I began to teach at NYU in 2001, undergraduate pedagogy has remained a defining aspect of my academic career. It is partly because of my teaching experiences, first as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and later as an Adjunct Instructor, that my conception of literary scholarship has broaden and deepened. My experiences in the classroom and with students in general have informed and steered my understanding of the place and function literature holds not only in the humanities but also for a wider public outside the academia. Over the past years, I have been fortunate to teach a diverse body of courses. Among them, Intensive Intermediate Spanish, Advanced Grammar and Composition, and Critical Approaches: Reading, Writing, and Textual Analysis have aided me most in my development as both a scholar and a teacher. These three courses stand out because of the undercurrent among them despite their distinctive course objectives and subject matter. In varying degrees, all three engage students in discovering how language relates to both literature and culture. Understandably, underscoring the kinship among language, literature and culture may happen more organically in literature courses given that doing so is one of the tasks at hand. In language classes, on the other hand, for such a tripartite relationship to come forth meaningfully, the full intention of the instructor is required. Hence, here I would prefer to explain how I teach Spanish in my Intensive Intermediate classes as I build the case that language is more than just a bare instrument for communication.

First of all, I do not ignore or obfuscate the inner-makings of the language. Equipped with graphics and examples, I expose them to the students as clearly as I can. For instance, when I teach verbal modalities, I introduce the subject by explicating that the difference between the Indicative and the Subjunctive reflects more intricacies than mere mechanical distinctions. The difference lies fundamentally in how the speaker positions himself or herself vis-à-vis the world. The Indicative is declarative, descriptive, and thus recreates neutrality between the speaker and the statement. On the other hand, the Subjunctive serves to single out how the speaker views, feels about, or encounters the world. The particular view of the speaker stands out, thus making the relationship between the speaker and the world a far less determined and stable one. Explaining, showing and emphasizing these differences, I guide students to see that the mechanics of the Subjunctive (often difficult for the native English speaker) allows richer and more complex expressions and thoughts: it refers to the world not so much as it is but rather as it should, could, or is desired to be. Another helpful example is prepositions, probably one of the most difficult grammatical elements in any language. They usually include more exceptions than general rules, and logic hardly helps to simplify the process of selecting one preposition over another. In other words, prepositions can be more arbitrary than logical, but it is they that
compose the intricacies and subtleties of thought. When teaching the uses of *por* and *para*, for instance, I encourage my students to relate to these prepositions beyond the given grammatical rules. *Por* will indicate something that pre-exists the verb that requires it, whereas *para* indicates something that results directly from the verb that calls for its use. Rules can be easily forgotten, but principles can stick harder and longer in the students’ mind. The larger purpose behind my teaching methodology, however, is to make the case that language is more than an amalgam of rules and exceptions. Language is predicated on a fluid interaction between the speaker and grammatical edifices that prove to be susceptible to ongoing practice as they also adhere to rules set by convention. Ultimately, employing examples and illustrations I help them to see that it is precisely this quality of language that enables the practice and existence of literature.

I view language as technology, and like every form of technology, it functions primarily by operations of translation: image to word, thought to phrase or sentence, English into Spanish and vice versa, etc. Based on this principle of translation and translatability, many goals can be achieved in an intermediate-level classroom, goals that do not limit themselves to the actual acquisition of a new language. A great deal of this happens by enabling students to be mindful and critical of the various processes involved in learning another language. I believe that language represents an impart-able technology (able to be imparted, according to Walter Benjamin), which means that at the core it is an ability that is by definition transferable. In other words, I structure my classes with the overall pursuit of teaching more than just an instrument (another language) but rather abilities that in many ways exceed the confines of the language discipline. In the classroom, I include other forms of technologies such as images, videos, and music, which are elements that inhabit students’ world on a daily basis—however not necessarily in relation to Spanish. Teaching language is inherently interdisciplinary, and thus I approach it in a multi-faceted fashion.

For me teaching language requires the exercise of the continued equilibrium of different skills: creativity and repetition must be combined with critical inquiry and mechanical recitation. I must rehearse such equilibrium ideally in every class so as to serve as a model for students. Learning a language necessitates as much critical understanding as detailed memorization. There must be as many oral activities as there is emphasis on writing exercises—after all, thoughts and ideas materialize via both media (the oral and the written) rather differently; pointing out *how differently* forms part of the process. Just as languages include a fluid composition, I recreate fluidity in my classroom. From the beginning of each semester, I generate discussions in which students pose questions and answers not only to me but also to their peers. The axes of interaction are multiple, rather than bilateral (students to teacher and vice versa). After a few weeks, this dynamic unfolds without my having to enable or steer it every time. They correct and assist one another with enthusiasm and respect. Almost unfailingly they begin to break out of the refuge of tacit assumptions usually associated with the practice of learning a language. They push beyond the *hows* and *whens* into the *whys* and *ifs*. In marking distinctions, they attain precision—not just in Spanish but also in critical thinking.
Gradually they seek to express with impressive effort more than what their actual command of Spanish allows them to. After numerous moments of error yet relentless trial, the correspondence between what they think (and want to say) and what they actually can say grows, as does their critical appreciation of such correspondence. At this point, students’ impressive tenacity and passion becomes undeniably contagious.

I recognize then that an optimum environment for learning Spanish on an intermediate level (on its way to the advanced) is taking form. In direct or indirect fashion, my teaching seeks to demonstrate that the horizons of a language intermingle with those of literature and culture. Having a firm grasp of my overall goals, I remain in dialogue with my students to gauge how the classroom dynamic feels and is viewed on their end. The intermediate level, a phase in transit from elementary to advanced, can be frustrating at times, so I try to be their most enthusiastic cheerleader as well as sober confessor. And as I remind them that (un)fortunately there are no shortcuts in learning a language, I also show them that it can be nonetheless an exciting and profoundly rewarding intellectual experience.