

Teaching Statement

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Teaching language acquisition is, for me, a transformative experience that expresses the cross-cultural world we live in. The first step is to create an atmosphere of mutual appreciation and respect. I introduce every lesson with a positive dynamic. I make sure to know my students from their names to their interests and future academic plans. I also encourage them to learn within a collaborative environment: when students share what they already know, and realize what they can do together, they learn not only from the professor but also from each other.

The second step is considering our mental health as a priority integral both to well-being and the acquisition of knowledge. The pandemic made clear that mental health and learning needed to come together as one, and the lessons learned during this period have become permanent elements of my practice as an instructor. In 2020 I taught *Critical Approaches to Literature and Culture*, a required course for Spanish majors and minors that bridged the production of language in all areas with the development of tools for writing and critical analysis. It was important both to focus on the class objectives while attending to the very serious needs we were all facing with regards to mental health. When we shifted in-person classes to virtual ones, I designed an activity for my group that helped all of us reflect on our situation as we continued to learn the required materials for the course. In this way, students continued to use language to reflect critically on their situation, thinking with, through, and around the materials for the course. The main thematic thread of the course was the body in literature; students wrote journals both in Spanish and English to talk about the experience of the body in isolation, so they blended the practice of creation and interpretation in equal measure. The result was a collection of narratives reflecting on our deepest fears and uncertainties. Later on, with the students' permission, the work was published in the journal *Esferas*, the undergraduate journal of Spanish and Portuguese, allowing them to participate with a larger community of learners and scholars. That experience provided me with many lessons. First of all, it informed me about the complexities of teaching in the XXI century and our responsibility to find ways in which to integrate ourselves fully in the act of learning. It also allowed me to prioritize the well-being of students while planning lessons, and to find ways to lessen the stress caused by unrealistic expectations and social pressures. That's why today, in order to avoid feelings of hopelessness or frustration, I encourage students to feel comfortable expressing their ideas unreservedly while progressing at their own pace, and I emphasize that mistakes are part of the learning process, so even the shyest student can feel less anxious. I find it a fruitful challenge to think not just about the materials of the class, but of the classroom space as containing a breathing and affective organism of subjects that will work better if we consider mental wellness as an essential part of it.

The third step involves the need for full Spanish language immersion to recognize the multiplicity of languages spoken in the country, which requires that we challenge the colonial concept that values certain languages and dialects over others. As instructors of language, we are well aware that language and identity work together; we also understand that language is both a

tool of empowerment and a reflection of social hierarchies. I had an undergrad student who wanted to ignore her connection with her home culture. After we reviewed Latin American “modismos” and idiomatic expressions, she ended up doing her oral presentation about reggaeton as a way to show how communities who don’t come from ‘lettered spaces’ can speak up about social issues and acquire their own voice. The wonder of language in its many forms helped reframe her relationship with her multiple roots.

Finally, I use textbooks, audiovisual equipment, Internet, and the lesson plan carefully prepared by the coordinators of my department (a team to which I owe all that I know about teaching). But a classroom is a space in motion, and language is a creative process (in my classes, whenever possible, poetry and imagination are welcomed). I include a range of cultural material and activities that tap into students’ creative and critical thought. I bring in images, videos, short-films, newspaper articles, podcasts, popular music and cultural artifacts produced by Latin American, Latinx artists and thinkers who challenge generalizations and identity stereotypes. These materials allow students to appreciate and discuss what is happening culturally, socially and politically in Spanish speaking countries (including the vibrant Latinx community of the U.S.).

I have taught Spanish for Beginners, Intermediate, and Culture and Context courses. I like to explain grammar rules no matter how much time we dedicate to a seemingly insignificant part of the sentence. I also have found that the scaffolded projects linking different skills such as listening, reading, writing and speaking are a good base for students to learn how to organize and structure their ideas, which helps in other areas of learning and production of knowledge. When learning language in context, students have had the opportunity to discuss a wide range of social issues related to their daily life: from gentrification to contemporary and emergent feminisms, from climate change to displacement, from racism and its nuances to resistance through communities, from multiculturalism to borders (including those of the visual language such as cartographies embedded with signs of power, which was one of the topics I discussed when, in 2021, I was a TA of the class *The Portuguese Sea: Empire, Decolonization and Diaspora* to undergraduate students). Regardless of whether I am teaching a first or second year of language, or a bridge course between language, literature and context, I emphasize that we share a classroom and we intertwine the complexity of our inner worlds, full of sentiments, wisdom, hopes, doubts, differences, trajectories, and futures, working together to open the horizons of our global/local communities.

I am surprised by how enthusiastic I have become about teaching. But the legacy of my parents may have informed my work as an instructor. Both of them were professors in rural Southern Mexico, where teachers sometimes had to work with not so much as a blackboard. Their most valuable tools were kindness, curiosity, humor and the ability to impart knowledge on a daily basis, often improvising due to the lack of resources, forcing them to pay attention to all that their surroundings offered. In addition to that, my background as a writer, scholar, student, and immigrant, enable me to contagiously share my passion. I see language as a vast lake in

which we don't drown. Even when we need to leave the shores of what we know and the experience feels unfamiliar and disorienting, language awakens our senses and keeps us alive.