Instructional Techniques for Foreign Language Teachers

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Teaching a foreign language can be a very rewarding experience. However, it can be quite the opposite, especially if the teacher does not engage well with students or uses ineffective teaching techniques. Other factors include bored and restless students. One way to avoid this situation altogether is to employ effective and engaging teaching methods. Some examples of effective instructional techniques include the Orbital Experience, cultural studies, and having students connect knowledge with past experiences.

According to Gomez, Gujarati, and Heckendorn, (2012, p. 96-117) one method that Spanish teachers can employ is the Orbital Experience, or OE. Its purposes are to explore the “affective domains of second language acquisition, including communication in the target language, making disciplinary connections, and fostering a community of learners” (Gomez et al., 2012, p. 96-117). Students accomplish these by researching a topic of interest to them, giving an impromptu presentation to the class, and writing an essay that connects their topics to other content areas. In addition to improving their communication skills, the OE lessens the anxiety of learning a foreign language for students by creating an environment of acceptance.

The authors detail an example. A rather shy high school student begins describing the highlight of the baseball season – pitching a no-hitter. He holds up the school newspaper and points to the story. His peers provide positive feedback, and the student smiles from his peers’ comments (Gomez et al., 2012, p. 96-117). Although the Orbital Experience is quite beneficial for students, other approaches can also prove very effective.

Rowan asserts that the “study of language is also a study of people and cultures, because language is an integral part of a culture” (2001, p. 238). Therefore, foreign language teachers ought to incorporate cultural studies at four different levels. In Levels One and Two, students become familiar with an aspect of a particular culture such as a holiday. In Level Three, students are able to analyze and explain that same aspect of the culture. In Level Four, students immerse themselves fully in that culture.

Rowan provides an example of how she incorporates these Levels in her instruction of Día de los Muertos, a Mexican holiday (2001, p. 238). She first describes the events and preparations for the celebration. Then, her students watch a video that follows a family through the celebration. Last, she “brought in items with which to make an ofrenda [an altar], including photographs of my father and grandparents. I had invited the students to do the same or to bring in a candle to light on the altar in memory of a loved one” (Rowan 2001, p. 238). Further research concludes that other pedagogical techniques also prove advantageous for students.

A study conducted by Erbes, Folkerts, Gergis, Pederson, and Stivers draws several conclusions regarding the retention of Spanish vocabulary (2010, p. 120-132). Students demonstrated more retention when shown real food items and marking if they liked or disliked the food. Students forgot the vocabulary taught using the drill and practice method more quickly. Therefore, vocabulary instruction must focus on locale memory, “a memory system which constructs maps or schema of new information and connects it to our prior knowledge and experiences” (Erbes et al., 2010, p. 120-132).

These three sources describe distinct methods for teaching foreign languages. First, the Orbital Experience allows students to research topics of interest and demonstrate their knowledge through presentations and essays (Gomez et al., 2012, p. 96-117). In addition, Rowan stresses the importance of cultural studies along with language instruction (2001, p. 238). Finally, a study’s results conclude that pedagogy geared toward locale memory leads to longer retention. Using these techniques, whether singly or together, would make dramatic improvements in classroom learning.

References

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