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PEDAGOGY

A Sympathy Protest: Products, Practices, and Perspectives in a Language Classroom

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Abstract: As K–16 teachers continue to reflect on how the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the Twentieth-First Century can help to provide a framework for instruction, curriculum and assessment, it is always helpful to analyze concrete examples. This article details a lesson that weaves together real-world political events with the arts and engages students in political protest at the same time. The lesson supports the vision of the Standards and demonstrates how it is possible to have students engage in intellectually challenging tasks in the target language. The authors hope that this article will serve to continue the dialogue and sharing of what all effective language teachers do in classrooms to realize the vision of the Standards to provide real-life communicative tasks that both teach and engage students in using the target language.

Key Words: ACTFL Standards, art, culture, debate, politics, perspectives, practices, products, protest

Introduction

In the spring of 2002, two language teachers were fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate on a professional development video series.¹ Both teachers were very familiar with the Standards for Foreign Language Learning [Standards] but knew the challenge of realizing the vision of the Standards in the everyday classroom. One of these teachers was serving as a Core Advisor to the video project and the other was Supervisor of ESL and World Languages while still maintaining a teaching load of a Spanish 5 class. Both teachers believed that having this lesson captured on video would help make some of the concepts of the Standards much more concrete for other instructors who reflect on their instructional practices and align them more closely with the Standards.

The particular class that was filmed was a Spanish 5 class that had just finished a semester-long module entitled “The Politics of Latin America.” During the second semester, the class was about to embark on the next unit of study, “Art and Film of the Spanish-speaking World.” While both of these thematic units of study were modeled after a college-like course and were designed as stand-alone “mini-courses,” the teacher still felt the need to somehow connect the two. There are many obvious instances of the expression of political ideas through the arts, but the teacher wondered what topic would serve to motivate her “senioritis-stricken” students.

The teacher thought about what was happening currently in the world of Latin American politics and remembered some wonderfully heated discussions that she had overheard among Colombians living in New York’s Jackson Heights neighborhood. A particularly interesting protest was initiated that previous year in Colombia among a group of artists, authors and intellectuals. The group, among them the Nobel-Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez and renowned painter and sculptor Fernando Botero, was protesting recent changes in immigration policies established by the newly-formed European Union. Starting in spring of 2001, Colombian nationals were required to obtain visas to enter Spain. Prior to that time, Colombians, along with

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other Latin American groups, enjoyed a freer entrance policy to their *madre patria*.

This new requirement of a visa angered Colombians, and García Márquez and the others drafted an open letter to the President of Spain threatening never to touch Spanish soil again if they had to acquire a visa to do so (to read the letter in Spanish, see Appendix A). This was the kind of protest that the teacher thought might interest her students. It had all of the elements necessary to engage and inspire: interesting characters, a rich historical context, a current topic and engaging textual support in the form of the letter. This actual protest was the inspiration for the class “Sympathy Protest” project.

A Rationale for Reality-Based Teaching

This lesson simulated tasks that students would potentially perform in the real world; it was centered on the practices, perspectives and products of the target language and culture and it was intellectually rigorous. Building upon a short scenario, it provided a vivid picture of what all teachers hope the Standards can do to provide an appropriate framework for engaging students in their own learning.

What was particularly exciting about this lesson was that it combined two different semester themes that the courses in the fifth year explored. This thematic approach was much more engaging for students and helped frame the learning for them. The students knew from the beginning that they would be using and acquiring language in a meaningful way—not merely learning vocabulary and grammatical lists that they would later be quizzed on. Instead, students had to apply their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in an effort to perform the required tasks. Moreover, students appreciated knowing that they were learning and practicing how to communicate in the target language. This was and is the vision that the Standards hold for language classrooms.

Research and Information Gathering

Once the students found an artist they liked, they were asked to read about their artist and explore his/her work on the Internet in an effort to get to know the artist’s style. They were required to print out three of their favorite works of art and information about the artist from the website(s). They were then directed to write an introductory email message to their artist. The teacher first worked on the proper language needed for such letter-writing. The proper use of formal language and register was addressed since these students were requesting personal information from their artists (e.g., “What inspires them as artists?”; “What are their favorite subjects?”; “How did they begin their careers in art?”) The teacher set up a special email account through her school district for this project and asked students to email their letters to her. After checking for major errors that might have interfered with the message, the teacher forwarded the students’ letters on to the artist they identified.

The teacher’s goal in setting up a dedicated email account was not so much to enable the teacher to edit student letters, but rather as a control mechanism for unwanted or potentially inappropriate communications between these students and unknown parties. While all of the responses the teacher received were nothing but appropriate, there is always some concern when mandating that a student send an email message to a stranger. The teacher preferred to err on the side of caution.

Establishing a Context

The next step involved the establishment of a fictitious group, *Cooperativa de Artistas Panamericanos*/Pan-American Artists Cooperative. This type of organization, quite common in the Hispanic world, provided a “rationale” for the students to be gathering together. Since struggling artists need space in which to work, it is not uncommon for them to join together in a

communal space. A *cooperativa* also provides new artists with a stronger economic or political voice, an element that would become vital in the activity that was to follow.

Students were directed to take on the roles of their artists and prepare for an exhibition of three of their favorite pieces. Those students who received messages back from their artist used the information to inform their portrayal of those artists. Those who did not, used information gleaned from websites, reviews and other sources to be able to present the artists as accurately as possible. On the day of the exhibit, students, seated in a large circle introduced themselves in the “yo” or I form as their artist and explained their themes and their styles as they displayed three pieces of art at their seats.

This “artist portrayal” segment of the lesson simultaneously combined many of the elements of the Standards. While searching various websites to find an artist to their liking, the students were engaging in the Interpretive Mode (Reading). Later, as they wrote to the artist of their choice, the students had to utilize both Interpersonal Mode (Writing), as they wrote their email messages and then Interpretive Mode (Reading) as they read the responses from their artists. This activity entailed prior planning and flexibility. Additionally, the teacher set up Plan A and Plan B in the event the student did not receive a response. The students managed these variations extremely well.

Establishing Identities

The creation of the “Pan-American Artists Cooperative” was an effective way to segue into the activities that followed and kept the lesson’s authentic, real-world feel. Students genuinely had a reason to communicate and they learned a bit of the cultural practices of the target culture in a relevant way. As they took the information gleaned from the multiple sources and read their presentations to the class, they were engaged in the Presentation Mode (Writing and Speaking).

It was appropriate that the students should make these presentations in the first person. This deliberate design was much more engaging for the students and it encouraged them to listen to each other as they assumed the personality and traits for their artist. In addition, the language level of these presentations was consistent with the anticipated level of performance given at the time of the year this activity took place (the beginning of second semester). It provided students with the opportunity to be successful and build confidence before the more challenging tasks that were to follow.

After the group had established their individual identities as artists and their group identity as a cooperative, the teacher informed them that they had been invited to a major exhibition in Spain coming later that month. The teacher explained that the group had to go all together, or not at all. Then, she mentioned the Colombian protest.

She provided the students with a copy of the letter and asked them to read it for homework. She encouraged the students to underline or highlight sections that they felt they agreed with and to think about whether or not their artist might agree or disagree with the protest.

The “invitation” to the art exhibition created yet another real-world scenario that framed the learning for students in a meaningful way. A multi-stage reading process was incorporated into the lesson. Students were first involved in a pre-reading task before going home to read the letter. During the homework they skimmed and scanned the text to find key points where they agreed or disagreed. These stages helped enable the students to become more successful in the more challenging task of decoding an authentic text.

Choosing Sides

The next day the students were asked to discuss and debate the topic with their classmates and to begin forming small groups based on whether they sympathized or not with the issue at hand. As a natural process of setting up the debate, a more formal reading of the letter was employed that gave students the opportunity to talk about parts of the reading that they did or

did not understand. The teacher negotiated the meanings with the students in the target language to make the message clearer. Additionally, general reading strategies were discussed, as well as strategies that students used to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context. Once the message of the letter was clear to all, two large groups emerged. One side was in favor of going to Spain to exhibit the Cooperative's work and the other side was desirous of a boycott, in support of the Colombian protest.

Each side was given class time to establish arguments for an ensuing debate. The students on each side selected a debate leader and a list of rules for the debate was also provided (see Appendix B for debate rules). Students used the information from the Colombian protest letter to inform their own argument, and also based their rationales on the previous semester's work on Latin American politics in general. Loud conversations and heated arguments ensued on both sides, as the "artists" struggled to get their viewpoints heard and included in the debate.

Debate Day

On the day of the actual debate, the students argued their perspectives with vigor and vehemence. It was in the initial preparations for the debate that the teacher was able to see students negotiating meaning with each other, using "inter-language" strategies to clarify meaning, paraphrasing when a fellow student did not understand and self-correcting when they heard themselves make an error in communicating the message. This did not happen by chance. This "communicative" culture of using only Spanish when communicating in the classroom was established at the beginning of the school year. Additionally, students were provided with expressions for clarification and circumlocution by using synonyms and other expressions. Therefore, when the time came for students to have this informal discussion, it displayed a concrete example of student-to-student Interpersonal Mode (Speaking).

Later, when the students prepared their arguments for the more formal debate Presentational Mode (Speaking), they were given a graphic organizer that helped them to organize their thoughts and ensured that they address all the necessary points. The graphic organizer also served to assist students as they listened to each of their classmates. These organizers are essential for second-language learners since they help draw students away from simple sentences and scaffold more sophisticated discourse. It reminds them to talk about all of the required elements of the task and frees the teacher so they may concentrate on informal evaluation as the activity unfolds.

The series of small steps that each student passed through before engaging in the debate was essential to the students' success with the activity. The steps helped them to manage the task and feel successful enough to lower the anxiety students usually experience when asked to perform such high-level functions as convincing and persuading others. The teacher assisted the students with language structures, vocabulary and discourse as they prepared for the debate, but did not interrupt the actual debate to correct grammar, since doing so would stifle communication, would destroy the momentum and distract from the fact that the students' ideas are the most important focus of the debate. After debating all points, it was decided that the Cooperative would boycott the Spanish exhibition in support of the Colombian protest.

Writing a Formal Letter of Protest

As a culminating activity, students were asked to formulate a new letter to explain their reasoning. Small groups were formed based on specific points made in the debate. The resulting product of the class was a conglomeration of each group's work. (To read the students' final letter of protest, see Appendix C).

During the writing of the formal letter of protest Presentational Mode (Writing), the teacher again assisted students by engaging in a dialogue to see if they could brainstorm the kind of language necessary in a formal business-type letter. The class and teacher collectively came up

with the language necessary, capitalizing upon all the students' strengths in writing, which in turn produced a much more powerful letter.

Conclusion

The students learned a great deal about art and politics in this lesson. They requested information, explained "their art," read a protest letter, and established and argued their ideas competently and passionately. These were appropriate Intermediate Learner tasks in alignment with the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K–12 Learners. With regard to culture, they learned about expression and the arts, about the *Conquista* and modern-day politics, and about issues of power. The teacher held the expectation that students would take away a newfound understanding of and respect for artists and their role in society. Moreover, she hoped that they would be better prepared to argue their beliefs and opinions in Spanish when they entered the world of university or work. Linguistically, students were able to communicate their feelings, wants and beliefs about a topic of importance to them—all in the target language. Through the lens of political protest, they were able to research and analyze cultural perspectives. The protest scenario—and the lesson and activities that were designed for the class—served to bridge the cloistered world of the classroom and the broader political arena, thus exposing students to issues of politics, art and ethnic identity.

NOTE

¹For more information about the video series for which this lesson was filmed, visit: <www.learner.org>. Click on the link for "Teaching Foreign Languages K-12 Workshop."

WORKCITED

National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. Lawrence, KS: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1996.

Appendix A

Colombian Intellectuals' Protest Letter

Available on the Internet at: <<http://www.nodo50.org/espacio/espacio/campa/visa.htm>>

INTELECTUALES PROTESTAN POR VISA PARA ESPAÑA

El premio Nobel de Literatura Gabriel García Márquez y el pintor, Fernando Botero, junto con los escritores Álvaro Mutis, Fernando Vallejo, William Ospina, Darío Jaramillo Agudelo y Héctor Abad Faciolince suscribieron una protesta ante el Gobierno español por la nueva exigencia de visa a los colombianos para entrar a ese país.

Colombia, 17 de marzo de 2001
Presidente de Gobierno Español José María Aznar

Señor Presidente:

Queremos explicarle, con el mayor respeto, por qué nos parece un despropósito que su gobierno nos quiera exigir un visado para pisar España, y por qué, en caso de que se tome esta determinación, y mientras esté vigente, no volveremos a visitar la península ibérica.

Un novelista colombiano escribió alguna vez: "Al entrar a España no tengo la impresión de llegar, sino la de volver." Quizás a muchos españoles les resulte extraño este sentimiento, pero les aseguramos que esa sensación es la típica del criollo, la del indiano, la del colono o del colonizado nacido en esos territorios de lo que fue el antiguo imperio de España.

Si nos atrevemos a hacerle un reclamo a esa gran nación que nos enseñaron a considerar, con razón o sin ella, como nuestra Madre Patria, es por el hondo convencimiento que tenemos de no ser ajenos a España.

Aunque las guerras de Independencia hayan cortado el cordón umbilical que nos unía políticamente a la península, los colombianos no hemos dejado de sentir, porque sabemos que es cierto, que nuestra imaginación, nuestra lengua mayoritaria, nuestros referentes culturales más importantes provienen de España. Aquí nos mezclamos con otros riquísimos aportes de la humanidad, en especial con el indígena y el negro, pero nunca hemos renegado, ni podríamos hacerlo, de nuestro pasado español. Nuestros clásicos son los clásicos de España, nuestros nombres y apellidos se originaron allí casi todos, nuestros sueños de justicia, y hasta algunas de nuestras furias de sangre y fanatismo, por no hablar de nuestros anticuados pundonores de hidalgo, son una herencia española.

La solidaridad cultural de las naciones hispanas y americanas, no puede ser simplemente un asunto retórico. Nosotros queremos poder entrar a España no digamos como Pedro por su casa, pero sí como los hijos viajeros que de vez en cuando vuelven a deshacer sus pasos por los caminos de unos antepasados reales o inventados. Los hispanoamericanos no podemos ser tratados por España como unos forasteros más. Aquí hay brazos y cerebros que ustedes necesitan. Somos hijos, o si no hijos, al menos nietos o biznietos de España. Y cuando no nos une un nexo de sangre, nos une una deuda de servicio: somos los hijos o los nietos de los esclavos y los siervos injustamente sometidos por España. No se nos puede sumar a la hora de resaltar la importancia de nuestra lengua y de nuestra cultura, para luego restarnos cuando en Europa les conviene. Explíquenles a sus socios europeos que ustedes tienen con nosotros una obligación y un compromiso históricos a los que no pueden dar la espalda. La rueda de la riqueza de las naciones se parece a la rueda de la fortuna; no es conveniente que en los días de opulencia se les cierre en las narices la puerta a los parientes pobres. Quizá un día nosotros (en ese riquísimo territorio donde ustedes y nosotros hemos trabajado, sufrido y gozado) tengamos también que abrirles a los hijos de España las puertas, como tantas otras veces ha ocurrido en el pasado.

Mucho se habla en España y en todo el primer mundo de las bondades de la globalización. Pero si ésta no quiere ser una mera estratagema para ampliar los mercados, la globalización no podrá ser un proceso unidireccional e injusto por el cual los bancos y las grandes compañías [sic] tecnológicas o de alimentos atraviesan las fronteras como el viento, mientras a las personas se les ponen más trabas, cuarentenas y cuotas que a los apestados medievales.

Señor Presidente: en sus manos está una decisión de unión o desunión con los pueblos hispanoamericanos. La Madre Patria podrá portarse como tal, y no darnos la espalda en uno de los momentos más duros de nuestra historia, o podrá también portarse como una madrastra despiadada.

Con la dignidad que aprendimos de España, no volveremos a ella mientras se nos someta a la humillación de presentar un permiso para poder visitar lo que nunca hemos considerado ajeno.

Con nuestra consideración y aprecio,

Gabriel García Márquez, Fernando Botero, Álvaro Mutis, Fernando Vallejo, William Ospina, Darío Jaramillo Agudelo, Héctor Abad Faciolince

Appendix B

Debate rules

Available on the Internet at <<http://www.cord.edu/faculty/gargurev/reglas.htm>>

LAS REGLAS del DEBATE

Cada debate tendrá un/una moderador/a, cuya responsabilidad será hacer una presentación introductoria del tema, indicar su importancia, en pocas palabras resumir las posiciones de los dos equipos y, luego, controlar el tiempo de participación de cada equipo.

-
- * Cada equipo tiene entre cinco y siete minutos para plantear su posición.
 - * Para las presentaciones cada equipo puede usar tablas o diagramas, pero sin leer nada.
 - * Primero un equipo, e inmediatamente después el otro.
 - * Se recomienda la siguiente distribución:
 - (a) un estudiante debe iniciar la presentación con una revisión general de la propuesta principal y el anuncio de los puntos que tratarán sus otros dos compañeros;
 - (b) los dos compañeros siguientes hablarán sobre el tema anunciado por su compañero;
 - (c) uno de los estudiantes debe, finalmente, hacer una especie de resumen de lo dicho como lo dicho definiendo la posición.
 - * Una vez concluidas las presentaciones, cada uno de los miembros de cada equipo podrá hacerle una pregunta a uno de los miembros del otro equipo.
 - * El/La moderador/a controlará que la respuesta no exceda el minuto.

- * Tras este diálogo, el moderador invitará al público a hacer preguntas.
- * El proceso no debe durar más de treinta minutos. Es responsabilidad del/la moderador/a controlar el tiempo.
- * Terminado el debate el público votará por el equipo que mejor presentó la posición.

RECOMENDACIÓN:

El día de la participación de su equipo vengan a clase vestidos profesionalmente y hablen profesionalmente, con seriedad, pero tratando de involucrar (to engage) a la audiencia.

Appendix C
Students' letter

Una carta abierta al gobierno español:

La situación que nuestra comunidad latina se enfrenta es muy complicada. Es un problema que nos lleva a cuestionar nuestras creencias. Nuestra comunidad de artistas decidió no ir a España porque el acto del gobierno español de exigir una visa es ofensivo. Si nosotros viajamos a España estamos perpetuando el mal tratamiento que nosotros recibimos. Por el tratamiento después de la Conquista (las divisiones de familia y de la tierra) es necesario protestar.

España es nuestra madre Patria, y no es justo exigirnos visas. Mucha de la cultura hispanoamericana es de España. Nos identificamos con España y su lengua. Nosotros tenemos las mismas tradiciones, por ejemplo la corrida de toros. Tenemos la misma comida y música. Compartimos la misma religión—somos Católicos. Nuestra cultura es nuestra conexión a España. También nuestra familia es su familia porque nuestros antepasados son los mismos.

Cuando los Conquistadores fueron al Nuevo Mundo, robaron a los indígenas de muchas cosas y la cosa más importante fue sus vidas. Los Conquistadores tomaron nuestra tierra, casas y vidas. Tuvimos que ser esclavos y no pudimos tener nuestras vidas. En ese entonces tuvieron todo el control, y ahora los españoles están haciendo lo mismo. Por eso, nosotros no queremos ir a España.

En conclusión, nosotros creemos que la necesidad de nosotros tener visas es ridícula. Somos sus hermanos e hijos—somos parientes de su gente. Tenemos la misma cultura y lengua de España. No vamos a España si necesitamos una visa.

-La Cooperativa de Artistas Panamericanos

(English translation)

An Open Letter to the Spanish Government

The situation that our community faces is very complicated. It is a problem that forces us to question our beliefs. Our community of artists has decided not to go to Spain because the fact that Spain now requires a visa of us is offensive. If we travel to Spain, we are perpetuating the bad treatment that we received. Because of the treatment after the Conquest (the divisions of family and land), it is necessary for us to protest.

Spain is our Mother Land, and it is not fair to require visas of us. So much of Latin American culture is from Spain. We identify with Spain and its language. We have the same traditions, for example, the bullfight. We have the same food and music. We share the same religion—we are Catholic. Our culture is our connection to Spain. Furthermore, our family is your family because our ancestors are one and the same.

When the Conquistadors went to the New World, they stole many things from the indigenous peoples there—most importantly, their lives. The Conquistadors took our land, our homes and our lives. Back then they had all the control, and now the Spaniards are doing the same thing. For this reason, we don't want to go to Spain.

In conclusion, we believe that the need for us to have a visa is ridiculous. We are your brothers and sisters, your sons and daughters—we are your relatives. We have the same culture and language as Spain. We will not go to Spain if we need to have a visa.

-The Panamerican Artists' Cooperative