

# Using Authentic Materials in the Spanish Classroom

## Focusing on the Interpretive Mode of Communication

**BY RICH SAYERS**

We know that all modes of communication are key elements in acquiring and demonstrating proficiency in a foreign language. With this article we are focusing on the building block of language acquisition—the interpretive mode and ways to use authentic resources effectively to support interpretive language development.

### CHOOSE THE RIGHT MATERIAL

It can be difficult to choose level-appropriate authentic content for students in the earliest stages of language learning. While students at the beginning levels will not understand everything, encountering some familiar vocabulary will help them access the content and increase their confidence in their ability to understand native speakers. Choosing video, audio, and texts that are thematically related to what students are already learning will offer a sense of familiarity and provide students with a connection to the material.

### PREPARE STUDENTS

Preparing students before watching an authentic video, listening to audio, or reading authentic content is essential to success.

- **Activate background knowledge** — Ask questions to uncover what students already know about the topic in the authentic material. This will help students connect their prior knowledge to the new content
- **Provide context** — Before watching the video, give students an overview of the type of content that they will be viewing. Talk about cultural elements that would be commonly understood by a native speaker viewing the material but that may be unfamiliar to language learners
- **Introduce key vocabulary** — Pre-teach vocabulary that is key to understanding the content



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## TAILOR THE VIEWING OR LISTENING TASK

One of the most important aspects of using authentic material with language learners is to make sure that the task is level-appropriate so students can succeed. Tasks that are appropriate for early learners include:

- **Write down cognates** — Ask students to write down any cognates that they hear as they listen or see as they read
- **Circle words they encounter from a list** — Provide students with a list of words related to the theme of the video, audio, or reading and ask them to circle the words they hear or read
- **Focus on common features of genre** — Ask students to guess the meaning of new vocabulary by considering what type of information is expected, for example, when reading a web page, students can reasonably guess that the “Buscar” button next to the search box probably means search because they are familiar with navigating web pages
- **Ask** students to predict what they might see, hear, or read based on the type of reading or the general topic
- **Discuss** cultural elements that are a background part of the video, audio, or reading, but are not the subject of the authentic material
- As students become more comfortable with authentic materials, let them work as a group to dissect a video, discuss with their partners, then present what they learned to the class
- **Show** the video first without audio and have students focus on the visuals, ask them to write words they think they might hear, then put a checkmark next to any they hear when you play the video with sound
- Have students watch the video or listen to the audio alone on a computer where they can pause and rewind as many times as they like
- Make a list of words they heard or saw that they didn’t know and want to learn; and teach them how to find words they may not know how to spell

## AFTER VIEWING OR LISTENING

Take the time after working with authentic materials, either as a class or as homework, to reflect on the content.

- **Consider cultural perspectives** — Ask students to consider the relationship between the products and

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practices in the authentic material and the perspectives of the culture where the video was filmed

- **Personalize understanding** — Give students the opportunity to think critically about the content and to personalize their understanding

Students learning a new language from a traditional textbook can often miss out on how that language is used in real life. After all, textbook language can sometimes differ dramatically from speech and writing in a Spanish-speaking country.

This presents an opportunity to bring in authentic learning resources into the language classroom to enhance the experience. Authentic learning resources are materials that were not created for language learning purposes, that is, they were developed for a real-world scenario and typically from the native country. Resources can range from television commercials on Spanish-speaking channels, newspaper/magazine articles, songs, and more.

However, using authentic resources requires a lot of research to discover which materials would be suitable for a language lesson. Not only that, but deciding how to integrate those authentic materials into a lesson scenario and making them accessible to all students is not an easy task.

Here are some additional ideas for incorporating authentic resources into your language classroom:

- **Locate videos from a well-known television personality in your native country of choice** (i.e. Food Network shows are often a good choice). These programs will show native speakers conversing and, in turn, show your students how they may actually use the language (when traveling abroad) to order food at a restaurant or perhaps from a local food kiosk. Show the video to your students first with no sound to get them to use

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visual cues to build understanding before they hear Spanish.

- **Locate a newspaper from a Spanish-speaking country (print or digital) and have students compare a popular world news topic from that newspaper to their local newspaper.** First, have students look at headlines, visuals, graphs, and other features to get ideas of what they will read. Then have them look for cognates and other words they know and highlight them. Students can then read and compare and contrast each newspaper's perspectives on the same story.
- **Locate a popular children's picture book series from a Spanish-speaking country and assign them as reading homework.** Have students scan for vocabulary they are familiar with but also have them collect

& record new vocabulary words that are unfamiliar in a journal and have them interpret their meaning from the pictures shown.

- **Bring in native local speakers to your classroom.** By bringing in local Latino leaders and community members into the Spanish classroom to speak on a particular topic, you can not only connect your students to the language but also to the culture while also exposing your students to a wider-world perspective.
- **Do class volunteer opportunities in local Latino communities.** By volunteering in your local community, students can experience firsthand the Latino culture, hear the Spanish language in real-life contexts and forge greater ties and connections to their community.

Incorporating authentic resources and real-life experiences into the classroom makes learning the Spanish language a more engaging and relevant to students. It enables them to more easily compare and contrast the products and perspectives of their culture with the great diversity of cultures of the Spanish-speaking world in meaningful contexts.

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