

Reaching 90% Spanish in the Classroom

BY RICH SAYERS

The goal of Spanish teachers is to get students speaking Spanish *in the classroom*, so they develop the language proficiency and cultural understanding necessary to use the language *beyond the classroom*. Research shows that to accomplish this challenging goal, most of the classroom instructional time should be in Spanish. Here are some strategies to help you and your students spend as much of your instructional time as possible speaking Spanish.

USE ENGLISH STRATEGICALLY

- At the beginning of the year, set an expectation as to when English will be allowed in the classroom. As students develop their vocabulary and improve their fluency, reset expectations. Students can be expected to rely less on English in levels 2 and 3 than they do at the beginning of level 1.
- Present the lesson objectives and the standards that will be taught in the lesson in English, so students have a clear idea of the expectations. Write the objectives so they can be seen in the classroom, so that less time is spent discussing them orally in English. Also review lesson objectives and standards at the end of each class to make sure goals were met.
- In your first units of instruction in level 1, you may choose to use direction lines in English to allow students to focus their attention on the task. However, introduce early key words that will be used often in directions, such as *leer*, *hablar en parejas*, and *escribir*. As students acquire a basic vocabulary, direction lines can shift to Spanish so that in the second semester of level 1 and beyond, direction lines for activities can be given in Spanish.
- If a student is confused or frustrated and struggling to complete an activity that was explained in Spanish, using an English key word or phrase may decrease frustration and help the student be more receptive to doing the task in Spanish.
- Consider when using English will be more effective for the instructional goal, for example, when discussing concepts which go beyond the language level of the class, such as cultural products, practices, and perspectives. Encourage students to use the Spanish language they know to describe a piece of art or a type of food, but allow English discussion for higher level concepts.



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USE STRATEGIES THAT HELP STUDENTS INTERPRET THE LANGUAGE

- Focus on your communicative objectives, and key phrases in the chapter vocabulary that support those objectives. For example, if the objective is, “talk and write about what you and others like to do,” utilize key phrases to meet the goal, such as:

- *¿Qué te gusta hacer?*
- *¿A mí (no) me gusta...?*
- *¿Y a tí?*

Use these phrases to present the vocabulary lexically in each chapter and repeat them in follow up communicative activities. They help guide students in communicating in Spanish right from the start of each theme.

- Strategies that will help students accomplish the interpretive mode of communication (that is, comprehend the Spanish language you use) are:
 - Create a context for the language input, such as talking about a menu, going shopping, going to school. Use physical items in the classroom, your own attire, posters, and more to make the context clear to students.
 - Match language input to visuals and physical items.
 - Use gestures, facial expressions, and body language to convey ideas.
 - Repeat key phrases multiple times, varying the ways students hear them.
 - Speak clearly and simplify with familiar phrases.
 - Use cognates and Spanish words that students know from previous chapters.
 - Read models aloud, helping students by putting emphasis on key words and phrases.
 - Check for comprehension often, with simple *sí/no* and either/or responses, thumbs up/thumbs down, and so forth.
 - Use video and audio so students become accustomed to hearing and understanding different Spanish speakers.
 - Link ideas to students’ background knowledge by including brand names, locations, and so forth, that they are familiar with.
 - Encourage personalization by including information about yourself and your students in classroom communications.

- Combine the key vocabulary and phrases into stories that students will remember.
- Use consistent physical gestures that convey meaning. For example, use a gesture, like passing your hand over your shoulder to indicate something behind you, to mean it happened in the past.

PROVIDE STUDENTS THE SUPPORT THEY NEED TO KEEP CLASSROOM CONVERSATION IN SPANISH

- Start the year with key phrases and vocabulary that allow you and your students to stay in Spanish, such as *¿Cómo estás? Hoy es ... Mañana vamos a ...*
- Write key phrases or sentence frames that link to the objectives on the board.
- Post word walls and language ladders to help students with reminders of language, and with *expresiones útiles para conversar* so that students can refer to these expressions during conversations and as they negotiate meaning with each other.
- Write sentence starters on the board for challenging activities.
- Utilize language placemats with a variety of target expressions which students need to start a unit and the year.
- Use differentiated instruction strategies to tailor activities to students’ learning needs so they can complete tasks at their proficiency level.
- Teach key words for comprehension checks: *¿Comprenden? ¿Verdad? ¿Están de acuerdo?*
- Model ways in which students can ask for clarification or help. Teach students how to ask for permission in Spanish: *¿Puedo ...? ¿Se permite ...?*
- Create a classroom environment which facilitates discussion, and is a high-trust learning zone that encourages students to take risks.
- Model for students what communication is to look and sound like. For models of communication, use yourself, yourself and a strong student, two students, or two students on a video. Affirm that students understand the model and expectations before being asked to communicate.

- Scaffold communication by having students first write key words or phrases that can then be used in sentences and questions. Use graphic organizers, like T charts, to help them organize their thoughts and the vocabulary they will use before beginning to talk.
- Have students communicate in structured settings like pairs and small groups. Move around the class and interact with students in these informal groups, providing encouragement and remediation.
- Use instant checks and formative assessment checks to ensure that students are not only exposed more and more to the target language, but that they are also acquiring and retaining the content.

ASSIGN TASKS THAT REQUIRE ENGLISH AS HOMEWORK

- Assign vocabulary and grammar presentations, explanations, and receptive practice activities as homework so that class time is free for interactive communicative activities.
 - Have students read culture notes or watch cultural videos at home and write their thoughts about the products, practices, and perspectives about which they have learned.
 - Assign readings with culture perspectives and reflection as homework. Have students preview the activity and look up words in Spanish to answer the questions.
 - Have students read complex directions outside of class, or as they arrive in class before they do the work together.
 - Use language ladders and password phrases to provide students the language they need to understand who is playing each role and to negotiate other discussions around the task.
 - Assign the reading as homework and use visuals in class to check student comprehension.
- Use interactive whiteboard activities to present vocabulary and grammar concepts in context and with action that conveys meaning.
 - Encourage students to use online flashcards, games, and puzzles at home to create a vocabulary base that will build confidence in their ability to communicate.
 - Use an App that provides vocabulary that is related to the themes you are teaching in the classroom. An App that provides model conversations in Spanish, coupled with the ability for students to record themselves, is an effective tool to increase students' confidence and willingness to produce language.
 - Provide students songs that combine vocabulary, grammar concepts, and key phrases so they can listen and practice on a smart phone and internalize the language they will use.
 - Use videos that allow students to make adjustments in the pace of the speech—slowing down or speeding up—to make the content more accessible.
 - Use videos with a closed captioning feature that provides visual support with written words, giving students another way to access the content.
 - Use scripted PowerPoints® projected on an interactive whiteboard with step-by-step visual supports for students at lower levels.
 - Assign authentic resources and current content in the target language, such as news articles, children's cartoons, and videos with various levels of difficulty.
 - Use an online recording functionality for students to record their speaking efforts and submit their recordings to you for feedback.
 - Encourage students' desire to communicate their thoughts and opinions in Spanish:
 - Provide additional vocabulary related to the theme, so that students can personalize their communication, thereby fostering greater knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in topics that interest and engage them.
 - Use an online journaling tool for them to capture cultural and personal reflections.
 - Use digital discussion boards where students and teachers communicate in the target language both inside and outside of the classroom.
 - Have students share videos that are meaningful to them and come up with discussion questions in the target language.

USE TECHNOLOGY TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

- Assign grammar explanations in the textbook or online course, and have students watch associated grammar videos outside of class. In class, briefly review the grammar concepts in Spanish or have students work immediately on the communicative grammar activities.

- Utilize project based-learning where students collaborate on and present projects in Spanish; and flip the classroom, utilizing student-lead activities and discussions with teacher support.

IN CONCLUSION

While reaching the goal of 90% in the target language can be challenging, especially at the lower levels, using a combination of strategies and tools can have you and your students feeling more comfortable speaking Spanish. Increased language retention and production prepares students to use Spanish in many real-world settings.



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