

# Differentiating Instruction in the Spanish Language Classroom

BY RICH SAYERS

## Teaching Heritage Speakers

### A DIVERSE BACKGROUND

Those who have a home language other than English bring a wider range of language abilities to the classroom. These abilities range from minimal functioning in the language to complete fluency and literacy. It is important for teachers to assess the language skills of the different heritage speakers in the classroom. This diversity includes:

- Students who are able to understand the spoken language, but are unable to respond in the language beyond single-word answers.
- Students who are able to understand the language and communicate at a minimal level. These students may be able to read some items, but because of their limited vocabulary, they may not comprehend much information. They may write what they are able to sound out, but errors are evident.
- Students who can speak the language fluently but who have little to no experience with the language in its written form.
- Students who have come to the United States from non-English-speaking countries. They can understand and speak the language fluently; however, their reading and writing skills may be limited due to lack of a formal education in their country of origin.
- Fluent bilingual students who can understand, speak, read, and write another language very well and have possibly received formal instruction in that language in the United States or in another country.

### PROGRAM GOALS

Heritage speakers bring rich home language experiences to the classroom that can serve as a foundation for learning. Because of their language background, these students have the potential to be bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. Heritage speakers need to be exposed to a program that can improve and maintain the home language. Students need to study the



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grammar and focus on vocabulary development. Emphasis should be placed on building reading and writing skills. It is important that students develop a sensitivity to when standard and non-standard language should be employed and comfortably adjust their language accordingly. In addition, students should be exposed to the diverse cultures within the Spanish-speaking community while developing a sense of pride in their own heritage. Heritage speakers need to reach a high level of proficiency and accuracy that will ensure success at the advanced level of language study and testing. These students should also be ready to transition into a focused study of Spanish in specific professional areas.

## FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Due to their diverse backgrounds, heritage speakers differ greatly in language skills and may need individualized instruction. In many of today's classrooms, teachers encounter classes that contain a mixture of beginning-level students and heritage speakers. These groups need different materials, different instructional approaches, and different objectives. **Here are several strategies that may be helpful for heritage speakers:**

- **Build upon their background knowledge.** Develop instructional units around themes and topics that relate to their life experiences. Encourage students to use these experiences as the foundation for building language skills through vocabulary development, reading, and writing.
- **Help students connect aural with written language.** If students don't understand a word in a reading, have them read it aloud or ask a friend or teacher to read it aloud. Often they can recognize the word once they hear it. Allow for opportunities for students to follow along as a story is read aloud.
- **Use strategies that are effective in a language arts classroom,** such as building schema, teaching language-learning strategies, using graphic organizers, and incorporating pre- and post-reading tasks. Use the writing process to develop good writers.
- **Encourage students to begin communicating, especially in writing.** Have them write down their thoughts in the way they sound to them. Then have students work with the teacher or another student for corrections. Students can also look through textbooks and dictionaries to assist with error correction.

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- **Maintain high standards.** Require students to focus on accuracy and proficient communication. Many heritage speakers experience frustration with reading and writing in the home language when they have good aural/oral skills. Building language skills takes time.

## Teaching Spanish to Students with Learning Disabilities

There are many reasons why students may experience difficulties in learning a second language. In general, these difficulties may be characterized by the inability to spell or read well, problems with auditory discrimination and in understanding auditory input, and difficulty with abstract thinking. Research by Ganchow and Sparks (1991) indicates that difficulties with one's first language are a major factor in foreign language learning difficulties. It is not always evident which students will experience difficulties with learning a second language. Many times these students are bright and outgoing. They may have experienced reading or spelling problems in elementary school, but they have learned to compensate over time. Ask students what problems they may have experienced with their first language, especially in the areas of reading and dictation.

## ACCOMMODATING INSTRUCTION

Students with learning disabilities can develop a level of proficiency in a second language with some modifications to instruction and testing. These learners benefit from a highly structured approach that teaches new content in context and in incremental amounts. Teach, practice, and assess using multi-sensory strategies. Many students benefit when instruction combines seeing, hearing, saying, and writing.

For example, a teacher would first show a visual of a word and say it aloud. This is followed by using the new word in context. The teacher then writes the word on the board. Students would say the word aloud with the teacher. They then write it down and say it aloud again.

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In subsequent days, many students benefit from frequent reviews of learned auditory materials.

## Accommodations for Students with Special Needs

Here are suggestions for instruction of students with special needs.

### HEARING IMPAIRMENTS

- **Help students comprehend oral information or instructions.** Provide written directions/materials and/ or visual cues to support what is presented orally. Face the students when speaking, repeat as needed, and speak clearly. Seat these students in the front of the classroom. Provide outlines of lectures or oral presentations. Have another student take notes and make copies of notes available to all students. Using audio and video scripts are also helpful for this student population. In addition, turning on the closed-caption feature will benefit students with hearing impairments.
- **Allow students to refer to their textbooks or to other written materials during oral presentations.**

- **Limit background noises that may distract students.** Avoid seating these students where they may hear extraneous noise.
- **Change listening activities and assessments to reading/writing activities.** In activities that require aural/oral skills, let students demonstrate skills through alternative responses such as writing.
- **Provide access to the audio and video materials as they provide pronunciation support and modeling.** Providing access to all listening activities, and access to the vocabulary and grammar videos will these help students further access and retain the content.

### VISUAL PERCEPTION PROBLEMS

- **Help students access information provided visually.** Allow for preferred seating in the front of the class, including providing space for a guide dog, if necessary. Avoid seating students where they will be distracted by extraneous auditory or visual stimuli. Give students additional time to review visual input prior to an oral or written task. Highlight important information by providing key words, visuals, and simple outlines.
- **Provide support for accessing printed information.** Make sure the print is easy to read. The readings should be designed to maximize readability: easy-to-read font, layout, and design. Teach reading strategies that highlight the visual aspects of a selection: text organization, use of visuals, titles and headers, and the use of color. Provide copies of reading selections with additional support: underline key words/sentences/ concepts or magnify the text in duplication.
- **Teach, practice, and assess using multi-sensory strategies.**

## Different Learning Modalities/Intelligences

Students may have preferences in the way they learn and are able to better access and retain the content when presented with the content and activities in a manner that takes advantage of their natural inclinations and learning style. Here are a few:

## MATHEMATICAL/LOGICAL LEARNERS

Learner with the ability to reason, solve problems, and learn via using numbers, abstract visual information, and analysis of cause and effect relationships. Mathematical logical learners are typically methodical and think in logical or linear order. They frequently prefer structured, goal-oriented activities that are based on math reasoning rather than less structured, creative activities with inexact learning goals. Students with mathematical logical learning styles enjoy school activities such as math, computer science, technology, drafting, chemistry and other “hard sciences,” and design. According to subject literature, mathematical linguistic learners prefer logical order in instruction and often prefer organized and structured environments. They are known to have strong visual analysis and memory and problem solving skills. These students like to build and tinker and find it very meaningful when they are able to bring mathematical and conceptual ideas into reality via hands-on projects such as computer-assisted design, creating electronic devices, and employing computer applications.

**Suggestions for this group of learners.** Students with mathematical logical learning styles learn best when taught using visual materials, computers, statistical and analytical programs, and hands-on projects. We suggest using as much digital content and touch points as possible. Interactive digital games, mobile apps where they can see and hear model conversations, record their feedback and track progress and receive immediate feedback are sure to be very useful tools for language acquisition and production. Theme-based projects and project-based learning activities where they use digital tools to create the result should also be an effective tool with this group of students. Cross-curricular activities that include an analysis piece would work well for these students. Interaction with authentic content that compares and contrasts cultural products, practices and perspectives should appeal to mathematical/ logical learners group.

## VISUAL SPATIAL LEARNERS

Visual spatial learning styles, or intelligence, refer to a person's ability to perceive, analyze, and understand visual information in the world around them. Many enjoy activities such as art, drafting, shop, geometry, computer graphics, and computer assisted design. They often have excellent visual memory for details in print and in the environment. People with visual

spatial learning styles are good at visual problem solving and visual estimation. According to experts, this group of students learns best when taught using written, modeled, or diagrammed instruction and visual media. Visually and spatially talented students have good visual memory for details.

**Suggestions for this group of learners.** Use activities that include Interactive Whiteboard activities, movies and videos. Use content that includes art, photography, maps and other realia such as surveys, recipes, etc. that give them a visual reference. In addition, Project-based learning where they have to create something tangible such as a video, website, display etc. would be good for this group of students. Tasks with written rubrics work well with this student population.

## VERBAL/LINGUISTIC LEARNERS

A verbal/linguistic learning style refers to a person's ability to reason, solve problems, and learn using language. This group of students will typically express themselves well and are usually good listeners with a well-developed memory for material they've read and recall of spoken information. According to multiple sources, verbal linguistic learning styles learn best when taught using spoken or written materials. Rather than activities that are based on abstract visual information, Verbal/Linguistic learners prefer those that are based on language reasoning and they will usually enjoy written projects. They love language and they enjoy learning new words and exploring ways to creatively use language, such as in poetry. Word games, reading, writing and memorizing tongue twisters and songs are activities that they are sure to connect with.

**Suggestions for this group of learners.** Online journaling, written lists, reflections, blogs, discussion boards, written comparisons on culture and their own perspectives are tools well suited to this group of students. Also reading authentic texts from a variety of sources, realia, videos and video models and audio sources are resources that will also work well with verbal/linguistic learners. Project based-learning and integrated performance tasks that focus on written presentation are great ways to help them relate to the content in a meaningful way and show what they can do with the language. Interactive digital games that use word searches and songs that help them learn concepts and vocabulary grammar as well as mobile apps are all wonderful tools to use in your Spanish classroom with this group of students.

## KINESTHETIC LEARNERS

Bodily kinesthetic learning style is also one of eight types of learning styles defined in Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. Bodily kinesthetic learning styles, or intelligence, refer to a person's ability to process information through the hand and body movement, control, and expression. According to multiple sources, bodily kinesthetic learning style people enjoy school activities such as athletics, drawing, modeling, sculpting, drafting, shop, dance, and hands-on sciences. These types of learners enjoy creating work with their hands, may have a lot of energy and need to move. People with bodily kinesthetic learning styles learn best when they are permitted to use their tactile senses and fine and gross motor movement as part of the learning process. They often prefer direct involvement with material they are learning than worksheets or reading from a book.

**Suggestions for this group of learners.** Project-based learning where they have to create something are a tool for this student group. Activities and tasks where there is something tangible produced, such as a craft, presentation etc. that represents a product or practice of a culture would be a great tool to connect them with the content. TPRs situation cards where they can use their whole body and gestures to communicate the language should be effective with this group. In addition, interactive digital games, songs, flashcards, videos, music videos, acting out, mobile apps where they can interact with the content are ways to facilitate this group of students to engage with and retain the content.

Having a variety of tools in print, digital and a variety of multimedia resources will enable teachers to engage with students on multiple fronts, and modalities, permitting numerous avenues and points of engagement for students to connect, acquire, retain, and produce language.

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## Teaching All Students: Summary

The diverse needs of today's Spanish students pose a challenge to teachers, curriculum developers, and school administrators as they design programs to ensure that all students develop language proficiency. With a robust language program, teachers have at their disposal a variety of materials and strategies to enable them to provide access to Spanish for all learners. Clearly, some students will require additional tutoring and specialized services to reach their full learning potential. The wider variety of resources and support teachers can offer their students, the more likely are the various needs of students are able to be met within a given Spanish-language program.

**Want to learn about *Auténtico* and what our program can offer you and your students? Let us show you how the activities and materials that accompany *Auténtico*, coupled with instructional strategies described within this article, constitute an extremely viable and exciting framework for reaching and teaching all learners.**

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