

The Sweetest Sounds: Learning Names and Asking Personalized Questions

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“Remember that a person’s name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language. Using a person’s name is crucial, especially when meeting those we don’t see very often. Respect and acceptance stem from simple acts such as remembering a person’s name and using it whenever appropriate.” Dale Carnegie

My goal as a Spanish teacher is to instill in my students a love of the language, the desire to take risks and create, to study abroad and become advocates for language learning. I’m going to be living next door to these students. They are our future. It is my job to expose them to the world outside of Norman, Oklahoma.

Although I love teaching novice learners, teaching intermediate Spanish is my passion. I have the advantage of teaching many of my students for 3 or more years consecutively.

The Importance of Learning Names

On the first day of class, rather than trying to convince my students to love the language, though, I learn their names. Learning names is like acquiring a second language. It takes lots of repetition. I greet them at the door on the first day and let them sit wherever they choose. When the bell rings, I introduce myself using CI, pictures, gestures, and props. Then I start introducing myself. I never look at the roster. When they tell me their name, I repeat it several times out loud and in my head. Then I move to another student way across the room. Once I ask 3--4 students, I go back and circle and repeat their names out loud. I make a point to say their

names as much as possible in that first hour. I repeat this process until I have heard everyone say their name out loud and I've repeated their names 6--8 times (most of my classes are 30--33 students). When I'm confident that I know everyone, I go down each row saying each of the names in order. Knowing my students is imperative. Having that rapport is pivotal. Without it, there is no trust, no respect, and no buy in. It is an art to interact with students and build their trust, be a friend, teacher, and mentor, and also stay in control.

Personalized Questions and Answers

Personalized Questions and Answers (PQA) will make their day. PQA is my favorite activity with novice and intermediate learners. Through PQA, I conjugate verbs, teach vocabulary, grammar, culture, interrogatives, past, present, and future tense, conditional, subjunctive, present perfect, and even pluperfect. The possibilities are endless. Through PQA, I can "ask a story," "circle", go off on tangents in the target language, get to know my students and build that rapport that is essential for language acquisition to occur. I use PQA for at least 15 minutes everyday with the students. On Mondays I PQA about weekend activities for sometimes the entire class. At the novice level, a great PQA question might be, "¿Qué comes?" (What do you eat?) or "¿Qué te gusta hacer?" (What do you like to do?). At the intermediate level, I might ask, "¿Qué comiste ayer?" (What did you eat yesterday?) or "¿Qué te gustaría hacer si no estuvieras en clase?" (What would you like to do if you weren't in class?). Each student has the opportunity to answer the question and I write their responses on the white board as I go. This allows the students to see the response and see the pattern. For example at the novice level, in response to ¿Qué comes?, each student will say "Yo como..." (I eat...) Ultimately students will hear "Yo como" 20--30 times. Then I will change perspective and say, "Clase, Juan come panqueques." (looking at Juan) "Juan, ¿comes panqueques?" "Clase, ¿quién come panqueques? Juan o la profesora?" "Clase, ¿comen panqueques Juan y la profesora?" "Sí, nosotros comemos panqueques." (Class, Juan eats pancakes. Juan, do you eat pancakes? Class, who eats pancakes, Juan or the teacher? Class, do Juan and the teacher eat pancakes? Yes, we eat pancakes.) This of course could turn into a TPRS story about the teacher eating 27 blue pancakes at IHOP. When I get stuck I always go back to circling with the question words.

Doing Your Research

It is also very important to stay current on pop culture. Karen Rowan calls this "doing your research." Know what the students are watching on Netflix, reading, what video games they are playing, what the latest colloquialisms are and where they like to hang out. If you have a student that is totally into anime, Google it and

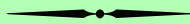
learn all about it, so you can blow them away with your “with---it---ness.” If you hear them using a new term, ask them (in the target language of course) what the term means and figure out a way to say it in the language you are teaching. Over the years I’ve used, “paz afuera” (peace out), “apretado” (tight, like “Man have you heard the new Ludicrous album? That is tight.”), “Antes de cualquier persona” (BAE, the acronym for Before Anyone or Anything Else), “levanta el techo” (raise the roof), and my personal favorite, “que crujiente” (my version of “that’s awkward”). This makes PQA even more compelling. The students love using these “terms” to create their own wacky comments.

My students leave my class with 55 minutes of compelling input in the target language, no homework (except to maybe read, text, tweet, and create in the TL), and a feeling of empowerment. I hear them leave my class and say to their friends, “Spanish is so easy, all we do in there is talk.” Make their day everyday and you will love your job, your students will love your class, and they will advocate for your program.

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