



Febrero - Abril 2001

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What Can I Do to Make My Upper Level Language Classes More Interesting?

5 Easy Ideas For the Professor Who Wants A Little Student Involvement and Interest In Class



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After you have drained your energies teaching the lower level courses at your institution and you do not have graduate teaching assistants to cover these courses, you may be scratching your head and wondering, "How am I going to make it through my upper level course or courses." You would like for the students to be getting wonderful information as well as enjoying themselves in the process. Too many times, the upper level course becomes tedious and less engaging. I have taught Spanish for ten years now. Here are 5 ideas I use to create some interest in the syllabus.

First, I incorporate into the course oral presentations. This gives the students the opportunity to investigate literature, or culture, or other elements thoroughly and present these to the class in the target language. The student is the teacher or expert for the moment. The class is responsible for taking notes and for paying attention. You, the professor, will use this information on future quizzes and exams. The presentations I give usually include that the student include visual components like powerpoint, video, or the use of the chalkboard. The student should also have handouts for the class. The student must speak in front of the class in the target language, for at least 10 minutes more or less, and answer questions from the class. Students most always rise to the challenge and do wonderful jobs! They are graded on fulfilling the requirements of visuals, handouts, and having a clear oral presentation. I make suggestions on a separate sheet for grammar or pronunciation, but this is not the main focus of the exercise.

Second, I require that the students be involved in small group discussions. The students are grouped into small circles of four or six students to discuss certain points of discussion.

Sometimes these groups are required to present their discussion or findings to the class. Outside investigation may be a part of these small groups, requiring them to work together for a day or two on a project to present to the class. Students are graded individually within the group. They only receive credit for having a speaking part and contributing to the discussion. These discussions are all done in the target language.

Third, the class not only takes written exams but they also take oral exams. I am convinced that oral exams can be given in any course. The student can meet one on one with the professor or meet in small groups with the professor. The students can then discuss orally, in the target language, the information required by the professor. This does take scheduling and some time, yet my students almost overwhelmingly enjoy these exams more and perform better on these exams. The atmosphere is relaxed in my office and I do not grade them on grammar and pronunciation.

They are only graded on the responses they give to the questions I have which relate to literature, culture, history, etc.

I give to the students all of the possible discussion items ahead of time. I would rather they have more to investigate and do well, than less to focus on and do poorly.

Fourth, I incorporate a few days for fun review. Students at this level, regardless of age, still enjoy playing a game or two. These games can be very poignant and relate directly to the exam they are going to have or have already taken. I play a version of "Jeopardy" in which I put categories on the board and point values from 200 to 1000 points. I do not have multiple questions for each point value. The same question remains behind that point value, when the response to the answer is incorrect. Other teams may try to answer the same question, if they chose, as the game continues. The students do not keep asking one question after another. They only get one chance each round to answer, and then after receiving or not receiving points, it is on to the next team. The groups usually range in size from four to ten people and they form four to six groups depending on the size of the class. I also award each team something for playing and the top team an extra bonus for winning. The classes love this! Try it! I even put in a daily double or two and have a final jeopardy round where the students wager their points. This is the only time I subtract points. For the entire game, only points can be added. If the team does not get a question correct, they simply don't get any points and it is on to the next team.

Fifth, and last, I require as part of the students grade to come into my office and speak in the target language about topics that do not pertain to the class. They must come by 5 times a semester and speak with me in small groups of peers in my office for 15-30 minutes. I make the students guide the conversation and guide the topics. They must let me know ahead of time what they will be discussing. This usually helps the students to focus on a theme and to prepare for the conversation. They may come in and talk about school parking, or talk about the media, or talk about a theme in the class. As long as they are conversing in the target language, you act only as a moderator and observer. You can give help, when asked, concerning grammar or vocabulary, yet it is best to let students as a group assist each other and solve their problems together. The students will form small groups and be comfortable speaking outside of class and practicing their language skills in a non-threatening atmosphere. They will simply receive all of the points for this portion of the syllabus if they schedule a time, show up, and speak in the target language.

These are only 5 ideas I have used in my upper level classes. I use some of these in my lower levels as well, yet I want the upper level classes to enjoy the learning experience too and to have as much fun as they did in the beginning levels of language learning. You too will have a more enjoyable experience. The class will seem less tedious, the students will have projects and responsibility in the class, and the class will mold together as a team, working toward a common goal of learning more Spanish, French, German, or whatever language you are teaching and whatever subject matter you are discussing. So, have fun and enjoy your upper level class!

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