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Oral Interviews for Testing in the High-School Spanish Classroom

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High Impact Fellows Project

Oral Interviews for Testing in the High-School Spanish Classroom

Time: September 2013-April 2014

Team Members:

Ms. Casey Calvert, Dorman High School, Spartanburg	teacher mentor
Ms. Kalle Davis, Wofford College, Spartanburg	student fellow / senior Spanish major
Dr. John C. Akers, Wofford College	faculty mentor

Introduction

Our project offers strategies and materials for the beginning Spanish classroom to increase oral proficiency of students through an emphasis on individual and small-group interviews with the teacher, which will be an integral part to every classroom test. These interviews will be referred to also as “One-On-One orals,” “OOOs,” or simply “encounters,” inspired by the oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) first developed in the 1980s to measure speaker competence in a second language--as per the proficiency guidelines of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). (Our project’s classroom materials begin on page 5.)

As we know today, the speaking competencies that the OPIs strive for and measure have shaped much of the evolution of our classroom teaching. Now, with this project, the goal is to use test-day interviews that parallel the OPI as a way to further develop speaking abilities and consolidate grammatical concepts and vocabulary.

The interviews can be as simple as having students communicate prepared/practiced material in Spanish to the instructor face to face--while the rest of the class is completing written portions of the exam. Our project will details sample interviews to help teachers imagine what they themselves might try (see page 5). We also provide some suggestions for technology use and share an activity that is outside the scope of the testing interview but can be a fun way to encourage classroom speaking (pages 12-15).

Background

The successful start to working one-on-one with students is to review important soft skills, similar to those taught to job interviewers and interviewees in the business world. (It is interesting to note that there are many advocates of client-centered communication for successful business development, especially in light of the growth of technology in business and how technology can affect and inadvertently limit important individualized communication. See for example the PDF file copied on this external drive, “Face to Face Communication: Making Human Connections in a Technology-Driven World” by Kathleen Begley.)

Most of us are comfortable teaching in front of the class and managing group work, but how effective are we addressing a student in Spanish in a one-on-one interview, especially when the rest of the class is busy with the written test. Can we connect in Spanish and sustain that connection? Can we put that student at ease? Can we manage the other students taking the written test? Here are a few suggestions that we all know and need to practice repeatedly:

Greet the interviewee/student with a handshake or at least a sincere smile. Students feel more comfortable when we appear friendly and approachable (surprise, surprise!). Facial expressions, open body language, polite hand gestures, etc., are to encourage the interviewee.

Emphasize eye contact. An interviewer/teacher who avoids looking at the interviewee/student appears disinterested. This can be discouraging for the interviewee, who is likely to stop talking or give short answers.

Listen carefully and respectfully as the interviewee speaks. Be supportive. Show understanding and attention by nodding or smiling, and do provide comfortable personal space for the student, though keeping the general space of the classroom in your awareness as well.

Students can be very intimidated in face-to-face or small-group setting with the instructor, so it is helpful for us to start group work with the strongest student in the group responding or speaking first. The strong student sets the tone and provides an effective model for the other group members. The strong student can also break the ice and free others for a moment to compose themselves as they now know what to expect, observing someone else perform. (It is also important to be careful not to place a very strong, very verbal student in a group with a student who may be lacking in any confidence whatsoever: the weaker student may sense too great a gap between the stronger student and himself / herself, and therefore underperform.)

In short, we want to connect with our students in this intense setting. In his classic study on effective teaching, To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher, William Ayers uses the metaphor of bridge building to describe our one-on-one interactions with students and how it is our responsibility as instructors to establish good, face-to-face communication with our students--the heart of the language-interview process:

Bridge-building requires someone to lay the first plank. Schools are often structured around the notion that the child should lay the first, the second, and virtually every plank after that. This is defeating for many youngsters. It seems clear enough to me that the teacher must be the architect and the contractor who begins to build the bridge. She must know the child in order to know where to put that first plank. She must also know the world, have a broad sense of where the bridge is headed, and have confidence that she and the students together can get there. And she must stay in touch with that child as the bridge takes shape... .

Ayers dedicates a whole chapter to bridge-building and the establishment of a “code,” shared by all teachers, to ensure good face-to-face connecting.

Classroom management by the teacher during interviewing is important. Contact with individual students has to be brief to allow for all interviews to take place. Invariably, things happen that may interfere with a smooth moving from one interview to the next; over time, the teacher learns to be prepared for what may happen, especially stumbling blocks that students will face, and pressures that can build as “things happen” under the necessary time constraints of a brief interview.

Some OOs, for example, are best carried out with students clustered into twos and threes. This takes coordination on the teacher’s part with groups chosen beforehand; we always try to work with personalities that will complement each other. We want students to know what to expect.

Some of the interview, especially late in the semester, will invite more creative, spontaneous speaking for both the student and the teacher, and therefore require an assertive confidence for the teacher to manage what develops. Experience will be the best teacher.

Our Experience in This Project

Over the course of this project we were able to meet several times with Ms. Calvert’s students in their classroom setting. We videoed a couple of small-group sessions held before the class; we decided, too, to focus our materials to cover testing interviews, rather than classroom activities in general. Working with Casey in the classroom gave us the hands-on experience to know what had potential for our project and what was beyond our ambitions. Casey, too, as she tried new ideas, communicated to us what was working and had potential, and what was best to reconsider and drop. There are two brief videos provided below that give a sense of what our classroom experience was like.

Current Standards for Language Professionals

The OOs are designed both to respond to and follow the current standards for South Carolina language professionals as detailed in the recent 2013 revision, http://ed.sc.gov/agency/programs-services/63/documents/2013_SC_Standard_for_WL_Proficiency_08-13-13.pdf, and stated simply as “the competencies a South Carolina world language learner should demonstrate at three of five proficiency levels as defined in the 2012 American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines.” The OOs are not solely to be designed as an assessment tool, as is the case with OPIs, but rather to encompass a variety of activities to increase close teacher-student contact in Spanish, including the creative use of technology; however, in our project the focus is mainly on the test interview.

To share this project with as many educators as possible, we presented early results of our work at the annual South Carolina Foreign Language Teachers Association Conference (SCFLTA) in February at Columbia College. (Our proposal is included below.) It was also a good opportunity to introduce the High Impact Fellows Program to teachers from around the state and invite them to the March 22, 2014, Summit at Wofford College.

Assessment

There is a detailed rubric for measuring speaking performance that is included with the project material. It includes the expected competency areas of pronunciation, content and comprehensibility, accuracy and fluency. Our team suggests another, overriding skill, rarely covered in speaking evaluation but at the heart of language learning: what we call “connectability,” or the student’s ability/willingness to allow for communication with the teacher to take place. Though difficult to objectively measure, as are the other competency areas, it is nevertheless a necessary subject of successful interviewing—but outside the immediate scope of this project.

Project Bibliography

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Classroom One-On-One Material

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) I

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

INTRODUCTION TO THE ACTIVITY; GOALS

Saludos, presentaciones y despedidas

This is the first interview of the semester and is carried out in small groups of three to four students and the teacher. The emphasis is on building confidence in the students' ability to use the language. Students will know what vocabulary to expect and to distinguish between informal inter-student communication, on one hand, and formal interaction with the instructor on the other.

THE INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE

Leading A Free-flowing Conversation

The instructor will begin by addressing the group as a whole, creating an atmosphere of connection and positivity. The instructor's body language speaks of openness and spontaneity, as well as leadership and encouragement.

ACTIVITY/PROCESS

Typical Questions

Instructor: Hola, ¿Cómo estás tú? ¿Qué tal?

Student: Bien, mal, así así, regular, fantástico, fabuloso, fenomenal. etc. ¿y usted, profesor?

Instructor: Estoy muy bien y muy contento por la conversación con ustedes.

Instructor: ¿Quién es ella?

Student (a): Profesor, es Layla. Le presento a Layla Johnson.

Instructor: Mucho gusto, Layla. Layla, ¿quién es él?

Student (b): Es Federico. Le presento, profesor, a Federico.

Instructor: Encantado, Federico. Me llamo John Charles Akers. ¿Cuál es tu nombre completo?

Student (c): Me llamo Federico José Smith.

Instructor: Bueno, es la hora de clase y el examen. Chau y hasta luego.

Students: Adiós, profesor. Hasta pronto, profesor. Hasta mañana, profesor. Etc.

The instructor can add material as appropriate: ¿Cómo se llama ella? Layla, te presento a Federico. Layla y Federico, les presento a María. Federico, ¿estás bien o mal o fabuloso? María, ¿estás fabuloso o fabulosa? Etc.

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) I

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

RESOURCES

Use vocab and structures in the related unit in the classroom text, identifying before the exam likely questions and vocab.

EVALUATION

- As will be the case with virtually all one-on-one activities, the assessment rubric of each relies on the following, summarized from Amy Buttner's work on assessment strategies in the foreign language classroom (Activities, Games and Assessment Strategies for the Foreign Language Classroom, Eye on Education, Larchmont, 2007, p. 20.):

- 1) Comprehensibility/content
- 2) Fluency
- 3) Accuracy
- 4) Pronunciation

Ideally, there is an underlying fifth area, rarely addressed but very real in education, which I call "connectability": the willingness and ability to connect affectively, through one-on-one communication, with the instructor. Initially, this is a challenge for many young people in English; the challenge can be even sharper in the foreign-language classroom, but once addressed and met, can positively affect all communication by the student.

In each of the four areas listed above, there are gradations of competency based on levels of understanding, ease and depth of response, grammar correctness and pronunciation.

Finally, it is suggested that providing students the rubric and emphasizing it on occasion over the year will help solidify their understanding of what's expected

CONCLUSION

This early example of oral interviewing emphasizes the need for instructor flexibility and readiness to lead the students to perform well. As time goes on, the instructor will see that his/her role is essential to the students' success in interviewing; the instructor will improve, become more and more in tune with the students' speaking, and know how to take testing units and devise good oral interview activities and question. The students, in response, develop better communication skills and pride in their speaking abilities in Spanish.

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) II

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

INTRODUCTION

La casa: Images and Activities

This activity/scenario is helped by a simple image of the interior of a house: a living room, a bedroom and perhaps a kitchen.

TASK(S)

The student will be asked to prepare/talk about his/her house, real or imaginary. The expected vocabulary will include basic furniture (as per each room, for the rooms you choose) and verbs related to activities in the house (room specific and house general).

ACTIVITY/PROCESS

This activity may be best suited for interviewing students alone or in a smaller group of just two students and the instructor. The reason for this is that the ability to identify furniture and mention house-related activities is close tied to vocabulary mastery, which is more clearly “know it or you don’t.” It’s good to communicate to students that sometimes our ability to speak is, as they can understand, directly proportionate to our having necessary vocabulary.

Each student will have just one minute total to respond to two questions: ¿Qué hay en tu habitación? ¿Qué haces en tu casa?

It’s possible to lengthen this activity by adding the adjectives of location, having students respond to “¿Dónde está la computadora? ¿Dónde está el cuadro? etc., with complete sentences, as in “Mi computadora está al lado de mi cama, cerca de mi escritorio.” “El cuadro está en la pared.” etc.

RESOURCES

A picture or two

The instructor will come to class with the same image used in class to ask the above questions. A relatively large image with a few clearly placed items is preferable to a small, detailed picture.

EVALUATION

Assessment follows the same guidelines for all interviews, and it is helpful to remind students of this to reinforce expectations.

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) II

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

CONCLUSION

This activity emphasizes individualized performance; it is also necessary to provide substantial pre-test orientation so that, as always, students know what to expect and how they will be interviewed (size of group, how long, where in the room, etc.)

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) III

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

INTRODUCTION

Hace + time + present tense: Expressing how long someone has been doing something

This interview question will exemplify how a normally tricky grammatical concept can be most readily emphasized and mastered by having it as a test interview question.

TASK(S)

Students will express how long they have been doing something by using the structure of “Hace + a period of time + the present tense. They will also recognize and use the questions that elicit that structure: ¿Cuánto tiempo hace que...? or ¿Desde hace cuando...?

ACTIVITY/PROCESS

- Students will be asked to prepare several answers to the questions “Cuánto tiempo hace que tú estás aquí en la escuela? y ¿qué haces?”
- The goal is to have the students become used to using “hace + time + a present tense, so they are to generate answers like “Hace seis años que estoy aquí.” “Hace un año que estudio el español.” “Hace dos meses que juego al fútbol” “Hace muchos años que vivo en esta ciudad.” “Hace quince minutos que estoy en la sala de clase.” Etc. Multiple answers will be required, probably three to five sentences, so prepare students by supplying many examples and encouraging creative, good answers. Humor is welcome, as in “Hace diez minutos que duermo en su clase, profesor.” “Hace ocho meses que no comprendo nada en mi clase de español con usted, profesor.”
- Students will also be asked to finish with “Y usted, profesor: ¿Cuánto tiempo hace que usted está aquí? y ¿qué hace usted? Or ¿Desde cuándo está usted aquí? y ¿qué hace usted?”

EVALUATION

- The expectation here is for students to come prepared, so part of the assessment given above might include a specific category for “preparation before interview” with gradations including variety of answers, humor and naturalness.

CONCLUSION

This activity gears the student to using an idiomatic structure that is normally difficult to master. Repetition of samples, preparedness, and levity all will facilitate a good test-day interview.

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) IV

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

INTRODUCTION; GOALS

¿Qué haces hoy? ¿Qué vas a hacer mañana? ¿Qué tienes que hacer este otoño?: Responding to open-ended questions using expression with “hacer” and covering both the present, the future and general obligations.

With students answering these questions, they will learn to talk about themselves more freely, using a variety of verbs. They will get used to the essential structures of “ir + a + infinitive” and “tener + que + infinitive.”

TASK(S)

Preparation is again important, and students will be asked to have three to five answers ready for each question. It’s the instructor’s challenge to provide sample responses, encourage students to devise ways to memorize their responses, and be creative/tastefully humorous in their answers (using negatives, for example: “No voy a regresar nunca a esta escuela.” “Voy a ser presidente de los Estados Unidos.” Etc.

ACTIVITY/PROCESS

Responses are to be encouraged to move forward promptly; if in a group of three students, one student stalls, it’s appropriate to move to another by saying, “un momento, por favor,” hearing the second student and then returning to the first, whom we hope will be prompted to now respond more freely.

Let students know the importance of practicing the form given in the question; for example, if asked “¿Qué vas a hacer mañana?”—using “ir + a + infinitive”—the student will answer with “voy + a + infinitive(s): “Voy a trabajar mañana con mi padre. Voy a volver a mi casa a las siete de la noche, pero no voy a comer en casa.

EVALUATION

Along with the usual categories, this assessment will include a simple counting of meaningful activities shared, thereby having the student understand the importance of compound responses.

CONCLUSION

Students are learning to generate longer and more varied answers, as well as use important structures and multiple times (today, in the future, in general). Students like to talk about themselves and take pride in lengthening the dialogue by giving multiple responses to one question.

Test-Day Interviews (One-on-One Encounters / Orals) V

High Impact Fellows
John Akers
Wofford Faculty

INTRODUCTION

¿Cuál es la pregunta?

A good way to review and practice essential Spanish is to have students form essential questions in response to random answers by the instructor. This is a spin-off of the quiz show “Jeopardy,” where the contestants correct “answer” must be given in the form a question.

e.g.: I say “Me llamo Profesor Juan Carlos Akers.” The student responds, “¿Cómo se llama usted?”

TASK(S)

Ten statements are given to the student to then formulate the questions necessary to generate the statements:

ACTIVITY/PROCESS

- Ten statements

Estoy muy bien, fenomenal. fabuloso y no cansado.

Me llamo Señor John Charles Akers.

Soy de Carolina del Sur.

Vivo en Spartanburg.

Tengo sesenta y dos años.

Me gusta tocar la guitarra, comer en restaurantes y viajar a países latinos.

Hace veinte años que trabajo aquí.

Enseño, trabajo con mis estudiantes, como con mis colegas y veo el fútbol a las cuatro.

Voy a ir a un concierto mañana y voy a dormir ocho horas después.

Tengo que corregir muchos exámenes y tengo que preparar para mis clases el viernes.

EVALUATION

Along with the usual criteria for assessment, how many of the questions are correct?

CONCLUSION

Review with Questions

Having students formulate the questions to answers they have already provided over the academic year can be an effective way to build their speak competence and confidence—and review!

One-on-One Encounters with Technology

High Impact Fellows
Kalle Davis
Student Fellow

INTRODUCTION

Technology

With BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies now in school, we have collaborated to make sure the technology is used as a tool for learning in the classroom and not for distraction.

ACTIVITY

Goanimate4schools.com

Students set up accounts to make animated videos about each lesson learned. For example, a character can be created to wake up in the morning and complete daily routines in Spanish while reinforcing the vocabulary with creation and visuals.

EVALUATION

Benefits

- School-safe
- Teachers can view the videos before they are shown to the class
- Character creator for multiple vocabulary lessons
- Low Cost
- No need to find video cameras or other technology
- Social-Media sites are blocked

RESOURCES

http://goanimate4schools.com/public_index

One-on-One Encounters with Technology

High Impact Fellows
Kalle Davis
Student Fellow

INTRODUCTION

Technology

With BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies now in school, we have collaborated to make sure the technology is used as a tool for learning in the classroom and not for distraction.

ACTIVITY

Audiopal.com

Make a free mp3 audio file to put on any website. This can be used for podcasts as far as lessons from the classroom that the students can access while at home or for pronunciation assignments or projects. For example, a class could have a written activity about what they did yesterday for work in past tense and then have an assignment to record a file to share with the teacher.

EVALUATION

Benefits

- Resource to measure growth in language fluency
- Students become more comfortable speaking
- Multiple practices with great exposure to the language
- Focus on pronunciation and correctness

RESOURCES

<http://www.audiopal.com/>

One-on-One Encounters in the Classroom

High Impact Fellows
Kalle Davis
Student Fellow

INTRODUCTION

In Class

This activity will be useful in helping students create language on the spot and become more comfortable speaking in front of the teacher as well as peers as far as conjugating verbs.

ACTIVITY

Roll the Dice

Make fuzzy dice with six different pronouns on each side using construction paper (yo/tú/él/nosotros/vosotros/ustedes). Toss the dice around the room between students. The students must conjugate a word in the appropriate format given the pronoun that their right thumb touches.

EVALUATION

Benefits

- Repetitive language practice and exposure
- Students become more comfortable speaking
- Useful for conjugations of all tenses
- On-the-spot orals with pseudo 1-1 encounter

MATERIALS

Fuzzy Dice
Construction Paper
Glue