

Crossing that line:

Communication and Spanish instructors merge classes for an innovative approach to sensitizing classrooms comprised of Americans to the sounds and rhythms of another language.

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Crossing disciplines and teaming up a Spanish class with a Communication/Speech class in a one-hour exercise boosts confidence levels of Spanish students, sensitizes non-Spanish speakers to the language, and makes all students aware of the difficulty when listening to a language not understood. These presenters share such a project they conduct regularly.

Stanley Fish points out that in interdisciplinary studies, participants “borrow” information and techniques from other disciplines and use them to explain or expand their own discipline (1989). When we combine a beginner or intermediate Spanish class with a freshman Communication/Speech class, we cross borders with clear goals in mind. When students in a Spanish class are forced to perform or speak aloud in front of a class, they gain a new perspective about the sounds of the language, a chance to show off their skills, and the opportunity to understand the usefulness of a second language. Likewise, when students in a Communication/Speech class are visited by the Spanish speakers, they are put into a sensitization position where, hopefully, the foreign sounds give them a new perception and perspective about second language uses, users, and listeners.

Since our classrooms today contain 10% to 20% international enrollment, these cross discipline language exercises expose students to new verbal codes. Our collaborative efforts are then fruitful because these exercises help explain and expand our courses to students with an impact that lecture formats do not provide.

Over the span of four quarters, we tried four different exercises with Spanish speakers visiting Communication/Speech students: a literary panel, a Who’s Who Exercise, a Short Skit, and A Proverb Exercise. Of the four exercises, the most successful was the short skit written and performed by Spanish majors. We will explain its methodology here.

A Short Skit

1. Development of the skit: Spanish students developed a short 15 minute skit. During instructions, we explain the basic elements of a plot which includes conflict, rising tension, and resolution.
2. Plot structure and conflict: For the skit, Spanish students decided that a female teacher would have a crush on a male student.
3. Rising tension: When the female students paid too much attention to the object of the teacher’s affections, they slowly disappeared (over four scenes). The reason for the disappearances became clear when the audience was given a view of a large machete (paper).

4. Resolution: Resolution came about when it was revealed that the teacher was in love with the male student, who was in love with another student. The teacher had in vain “killed,” yes, “killed,” the female students. The clincher signifies the end of the play when the audience learns that the paramour of the male student is another of his own gender.

Communication students work in groups

While the skit was in progress, Communication students made notes about the plot structure, characters’ names, and events of each scene. At the close of the skit, the Communication students, in groups, wrote short paragraphs about the plot, conflict and resolution. Those groups who were accurate in their assessments were given extra credit points.

Videotaping the Exercise

A video camera was used to record not only the skit but the question and answer session that followed. Then, too, the Spanish students later had a chance to see and hear themselves using Spanish.

Results of the Exercise

Comments from writers and actors: well worth the effort; good to see reactions from our actions; fun diversion from regular classtime; exaggerated body language was extremely fun; felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish.

Comments from communication students: fun hearing words we could recognize (cognates); realize now how important non-verbal communication is; good to listen to Spanish, interested now in taking Spanish; surprised at how much we could understand.

Our Recommendations

Crossing disciplines is not only enjoyable for students; we as faculty enjoy the activity immensely. We would encourage doing this exercise in smaller groups (less than 15) of Spanish speakers to avoid congestion. If there are more than 15 students, divide them into two or more groups with each group writing and performing a skit. Also, it is best to survey the non-Spanish class of students first to determine which students know Spanish. For those students who are already very familiar with Spanish, we suggest putting them into their own group and giving them more goals in the assignment. Lastly, it is important that we reward all students participating with either letter grades or extra credit. We want to remind readers however, what Fish points out: there have to be clear goals or objectives in mind by instructors when crossing the disciplines. •

Fish, Stanley. “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do.” Profession 89 New York: MLA, 1989. 15-22