TEACHING PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGY

I. Philosophy and general approach to language teaching

There is a thread that runs through my current research and pedagogical activities, connecting my concerns in my dissertation with my teaching: the notion that the creativity and commitment of intellectual endeavors—understood in a broad and down-to-earth sense—entail what I borrow from and rearticulating Ernst Bloch’s theorizations—like to call a utopian function. This function is not to be interpreted through the notion of utopia as the no-place of the impossible, but rather as the process of a constant movement forward, always open to the future but vigilant of the present and learning from the past. This is the way I have come to view teaching: more than a strict and stifling methodology full of pre-established views and pre-conceptions, teaching is a process that gets constantly renewed by a combination of critically evaluating past experiences with current outcomes and future expectations. It is also a bi-directional (or rather, multidirectional) effort where the students’ meaningful involvement in the subject contributes greatly to this “movement forward”.

Motivation is vital to the learning process. Therefore, I strive to capture my students’ interest and attention first of all by creating an environment that is both challenging and focused on excellence, yet cordial. This kind of environment is further reinforced by conveying to my students my enthusiasm and dedication to teaching. I develop or modify activities to make sure we all learn each others’ names and interests. In my experience with this approach the results have been rewarding for them and for me as this atmosphere encourages students to participate in such a way that they both want to do their best and learn from mistakes (their own and their classmates’). In fact, depending on the activity and on the stage of the material being learned, I like to make students aware of the role of mistakes in the whole process as part of helping them build self-learning skills into their language learning. I have been adding workshop-like activities to the elementary levels and students have found it very helpful to share their texts with each other in polishing and developing their language skills.

In the past year, I have increased students’ meaningful interaction in the classroom by creating or exploiting and modifying activities—such as those proposed by the textbook—that involve negotiating meaning and outcomes. To accommodate different personalities and learning styles, I have resorted more and more to making students work first in small groups. No matter how comfortable and engaging a classroom environment might be, there are always students who are either too shy or self-conscious to dare to speak up when a discussion is open, especially in a foreign language. Small groups give them an opportunity to demonstrate their work, interests and capabilities in a secure environment, which should help them build up their confidence.

As part of the process of reinforcing their autonomy as learners, I request my students conduct guided round tables and prepare interactive presentations where they must include activities to involve their classmates. This way, students are not just listening as their classmates give presentations but are engaged and responsive to the work of others.

Learning in the classroom environment is improved when students can relate to what they are learning. Therefore, I make certain to include a variety of activities that foster the student’s meaningful and creative involvement. A communicative approach to language learning/teaching plays an essential role when it comes to developing and implementing activities in the language classroom. Dialogues, role-plays, presentations, group and paired activities that both create a need for meaningful use of the target language and include topics with which the students can identify, form the central basis of my teaching practice. I try to create a balance between activities promoting a broad cultural interest by introducing topics new to the students’ horizon of expectations, and activities incorporating topics with which they are familiar but have to rearticulate in the target language. To make sure the meaning of the activity is not viewed just in isolated linguistic terms, I try to include or design activities where the language is used to carry out a task, preferably with some real life content or reference, whether it be a small task such as matching real-life company logos to kinds of companies—to build up textbook vocabulary in a contextualized manner—or a larger one such as designing a public health campaign or writing a story from the perspective of marginalized characters after several pre-tasks.
Communicative theories of language learning are also extremely useful when it comes to accommodating the needs and learning styles of different kinds of students. I bring activities that target different skills, from audiovisual (movies, music, slides, pictures, voice recordings, podcasts) to visual (newspapers, short-stories, magazines) to multimedia (PowerPoint presentations, internet-based activities, Course Management). These activities involve tasks that challenge them to go beyond the textbook when needed, and to keep bringing their experience and knowledge of matters beyond Spanish into the learning experience.

Teaching/learning a language in a foreign language environment, must be made through a careful balance between conscious and analytical teaching/learning, on the one hand, and an intuitive process whereby the student should get a feeling for the language, on the other hand, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels. I also believe that in this context, there is room, however small, for the students’ mother (or host) tongue. At the college level and in a foreign language environment, we are dealing with adults who, unlike children, come with a linguistic baggage that carries along not just words but experiences, worldviews, expectations, etc. Therefore, English use in class, although kept at a minimum and reduced even more as they learn more, is viewed as a tool, both to negotiate meaning (translating words, for instance, especially at the beginner level and for activities that require certain speed) and to analyze certain subtleties of the subject matter (grammar points).

I do not believe in innovation per se and reinventing the wheel every single time. Although I develop several new activities from scratch, I also find it useful to modify and improve on activities previously designed by other instructors and at the same time to share my activities with colleagues for them to use and improve on. Collaboration in teaching is a powerful tool that forces us to develop more consciously our activities, to open ourselves to constructive criticism and to critical modification of teaching methods and approaches, again, as part of the “open-ended”, utopian function of teaching explained above.

Last but not least, teaching in a foreign country and culture has made this experience all the more rewarding because I am constantly challenging my preconceptions and expanding my worldview and that of my students’. Language, as part of our everyday life, becomes worn and taken for granted, something most people, except perhaps writers and linguists, tend to forget about. Teaching a foreign language not only opens up a “foreign” world to the students but also brings new luster, meaning and significance to their own language (and mine). Learning a foreign language forces us to view our own language and the world embedded in it in a new light. From phonemes (English speaking students unfamiliar with the accent from Spain think Spaniards lisp until they realize they have the same phoneme in English, although represented by a different grapheme) to the sound of words, to the way they expressively capture an idea (funny-bone, “amanecer” as a personal verb in “Amanecí a tu lado”, the fascination of Hemingway for cursing in Spanish) to full texts that convey a different worldview, students learning a foreign language are inevitably involved in this process of transculturation.

To exploit as much as possible this (re-) enchantment of the language, I provide my students with activities and material that develop in them a greater cultural understanding and awareness of the Spanish speaking peoples and that demand them to think critically about their own culture, something which, in its turn, helps me understand their culture and mine better.

II. General methodology

I make students work from the very beginning in small groups to carry out all kinds of activities. I usually start with those activities proposed on the textbook but modify them to contextualize them more properly or to exclude unnecessary items while including others I consider more appropriate to my students. I adapt textbook activities based on notes and experience with them and familiarity with the pros and cons of the book. I also vary the order in which I introduce the material from each chapter to make room for different learning styles and needs and to experiment with different features it may have. I create web pages and PowerPoint presentations to supplement the textbook and to make material more
accessible as visuals and internet help engage students more and understand concepts better. I make sure to include different kinds of cultural material pertaining to each unit’s focus. At different stages of each chapter, I incorporate a variety of activities such as skits, interviews, compositions, debates, etc, involving students’ creativity and interaction, always guided by preparatory tasks. Most activities have an oral component to encourage students to talk and to help them develop confidence in their speaking skills.

I give students several small writing assignments that are not graded—although evaluated—besides longer compositions to allow them to practice without the pressure of a grade. For longer compositions, students turn in a first draft which I return with some correction keys (see “Forms”); they have the opportunity to rewrite them following these guidelines to help them self-correct them and learn from their mistakes. I am very demanding on the larger assignments as I expect them to show a true understanding of the topic and of the language needed to express their ideas and to show they incorporate ideas discussed in class and new language in a way that goes beyond repetition of class discussions and presentations.

Depending on the stage, purpose of the activity and the ability of each student, I encourage self-correction by different methods: stopping and asking them to rephrase, returning a question to make the mistake evident (for instance if they forget to change a “tu” into a “su” when reporting on the results of an interview), etc. However, if I am dealing with a student who is struggling and stopping the natural flow of the class, I combine self-correction with direct correction.

I used to believe that self-correction was the best alternative independently of the activity and the student. But applying some common sense and extrapolating the learning process of a child, it makes sense to provide immediate feedback every now and then. This is also valid for certain type of oral activities (presentations). A child has all the time and input to learn his/her own language. Parents and adults constantly fill in the gaps and communication takes place effectively. Adult learners, obviously do not have this “advantage” but they can also progress more rapidly if they hear/receive appropriate feedback and input instead of constantly being forced to analyze. This is what I meant above by having the students get a feeling for the language. More than striving for a careful balance between the analytical and the intuitive elements, both approaches should be constantly fine-tuned, tested and adapted to each student.

Developing speaking skills is one of the most difficult tasks for students, especially at the beginner level. Ideally, they need to be exposed as much as possible to the target language. Nowadays, the internet can be very helpful in providing them with real audio and audiovisual content. In order to include real material from the very beginning levels, I try to use videos not only from youtube—a very useful feature—but also from education portals, and design activities for a guided viewing. Even though most activities are centered on the students, at the beginner level, students still do not have the skills to recognize their mistakes easily and are struggling with basic structures and pronunciation. Therefore, besides some videos, in class I am the students’ main source of real language input. Therefore, I view some focus on grammar as a natural and meaningful way to give them input they need. Also, I try to help them with their pronunciation and grammar, avoiding unnecessary disruptions in the flow of conversations by repeating some of their answers and having them repeat when appropriate. My objective with this is to give them appropriate models (grammar, vocabulary in context, pronunciation, etc) from which they can start and move forward.

I also make sure that paired and small-group activities are checked in an open format, either by having the original pairs demonstrate what they did (or share information gathered) or by redoing the activity in an open format (for instance, instead of asking a question to their original partner, they will ask the question out loud to somebody—anybody—across the room. This also serves the purpose of making sure they relate to different people).

Finally, I bring additional readings to the class to help students become familiar with literature in Spanish, develop reading skills, build up their vocabulary and provide topics for oral and written activities.