

A Recipe to Teaching Hispanic Literature to Undergraduate Students in the United States

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Abstract: Millions of dollars are invested in creating beginner level textbooks and publishing advance level literature anthologies, but little is spent on putting together and publishing literary textbooks for those L2 Spanish learners that find themselves bridging the intermediate to advanced levels in the US curriculum. The industry has lost sight of the middle child which is just as important as, or more important than, the beginning and advanced L2 learners. Those students that find themselves transitioning from intermediate to advanced are central to a make or break period to continuing as Spanish majors. The literary textbooks that do exist appear to fall short of enhancing cognitive literary advancement in L2 learners in this transitional stage. This article is a modest attempt to address this void that exists at the undergraduate university levels of L2 Spanish learners.

Keywords: Spanish Literature. Undergraduate students. Teaching and Textbooks.

A little bit of Susan Bacon's author contextualization, a dash of pre-reading exercises, a smidgen of second language (L2) learners and a thrilling narrative and/or poem creates a savory and delightful chatty mixture. Add to this mixture a pinch of post-reading exercises and voilà, the Spanish literature class in which no one talks because they don't understand the story or poem becomes the elevated soufflé. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight on how to facilitate Hispanic literature for intermediate to advanced level Spanish undergraduate students in the United States. For students to enjoy literature there must be building blocks for them in the literature classes. Students who are connecting the bridge between intermediate to advanced level literature courses incur problems in understanding and discussing literature texts in Spanish, and in acquiring the relevant literature skills needed for advanced literature courses. The L2 learners are still struggling with the language; thus, an age-old problem.

According to Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg in *Languages and Children*, students must have or be able to function in both the interpretive and presentational modes in order to succeed in literacy (85). This is true for both young children as well as beginning and intermediate university (L2) learners.

The authors go on to explain that these skills are developed through reading and writing skills which lead to effective communication in the L2 (85-86). Non-native undergraduate speakers begin to acquire these skills through chunks of information that they have acquired and then processed as they continue to learn the language. Moreover studies show that L2 acquisition is best acquired by using the target language and authentic material (Bacon et al 469).

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Students in literature classes need background knowledge to understand and make sense of what they are reading in addition to reinforcement during and after reading the text to ensure that they have comprehended the literature piece. L2 learners are dealing with two elements: Understanding the text and comprehending the language (Curtain et al 87-88).

Benjamin Bloom and his collaborators devised a framework that develops learning goals that tie into Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg ideas.

University L2 educators could benefit by reframing teaching centered text-based talk formats into intermediate to advanced level L2 literature courses using Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy. Educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues in 1956 created his worldly learning schema "of six hierarchically ordered levels of instructional outcomes" (Granello 294). The levels are ordered from the lowest level of process to the highest:

- 1) Knowledge (remembering),
- 2) Comprehension (understanding),
- 3) Application (applying),
- 4) Analysis (analyze),
- 5) Synthesis (create) and
- 6) Evaluation (evaluate).

Bloom's lower levels consist of simple recall or recognition of facts, while the higher levels consist of analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating. Bloom believed that learning is dependent on attained prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels. Therefore, it would be logical that activities in literature classes be arranged to encourage students first to draw on their background knowledge (*preparation*) to understand the information (*comprehension*), to then go beyond and challenge their knowledge (*application, synthesis, analysis, evaluation*). It would be reasonable to use ingredients that link intermediate to advanced level literary readings such as organize pre-reading, reading and post reading activities for each literary piece to encourage students to stretch outside their comfort level in each part, but allow them to fully understand and appreciate the literary text.

Most intermediate literature textbooks attempt to use Blooms schema but few succeed in achieving the goal because they fizzle into a series of comprehension questions and do not promote cognitive advancement. Students in the intermediate literary bridge are still trying to grasp the literary concept. Dividing the literature pieces into three cognitive sections help students understand and assimilate the literature piece. The first step is to give the student knowledge about the author and his/her rhetorical devices or use of language in their creative work. Each literary piece may begin with a short biography of the author and a cultural context to place the author and the literary piece into their sociopolitical, historical and cultural environment. This information is intended to encourage students to recall their studies from other courses and to make connections to previous knowledge. The biography does not have to be long, a paragraph or two. For instances, if the reading assignment happened to be the short story "Mayonesa adelgazante" by Laura Esquivel, a few bibliographic lines would suffice: La escritora Laura Esquivel nació en la Ciudad de México en 1950. Mientras ejercía su cargo como profesora de preescolar, escribía historias para sus estudiantes y de esta manera llevó sus escritos a la televisión.

Entre sus obras más conocidas se encuentran *Como agua para chocolate*, escrita en 1990, *la Ley del amor* escrita en 1995, *Intimas succulencias* finalizada en 1998, *la Estrellita marinera* escrita en 1999, *el Libro de las emociones* y *Tan veloz como el deseo* terminadas en los años 2000 y 2001 subsiguientemente. (Rodríguez et al)

In addition to the bibliographic information a short cultural context should follow: “Los patrones observables en la literatura de Esquivel tienen que ver con *la mujer* y su continua lucha para llegar a ser en un entorno ya construido por *otros*. Otro patrón observable es el de la *cocina* en donde los condimentos, las mezclas...” (Rodríguez et al). The cultural context is to situate the author in his/her time period and/or to provide facts on any symbolisms or literary devices the author may use in his/her text. This is so that the student can make connections with the literature piece.

After each cultural context (*preparation*), the first cognitive section would be the pre-reading activities. The pre-reading activities should incorporate information from the cultural context, introduce new vocabulary and/or concepts. The pre-reading activities will help the student better understand the historical and cultural context in which each literary piece was written. The activities in this section should vary from completing sentences with the correct vocabulary word or verb, to identifying on a map the country and capital of origin of the author. Rewriting sentences with synonymous words or expressions that may pertain to certain countries will help with regionalism that may appear again in the literature piece. The intention is to facilitate comprehension of difficult expressions or cultural misunderstandings that students may have. Such activities may promote their understanding of the text. When the student actually begins to read and encounters such nuances s/he will have already been introduced to them.

Esquivel’s short story “Mayonesa adelgazante” talks about the uneasy feelings about being in a new country and away from home and all that is familiar. The character relates how the new country differs from her own, even the supermarket and the foods are different. Two pre-reading activities might be: “Lean las siguientes expresiones y analícelas, trabajando en parejas y den sus resultados. 1. ‘Tiene por objetivo entumirnos la voluntad y la alegría.’” Or, “‘En grupos de cuatro discutan cómo se sentirían en las siguientes circunstancias. 1. Visitas un supermercado o una tienda y no encuentras las cosas en el orden o en la forma que tú esperabas’” (Rodríguez et al).

The two examples present vocabulary and expressions that students will encounter, “entumirnos la voluntad y la alegría” and sets-up the idea of what it means to be in a different country. The second exercise sets-up what it means to be away from home.

This is a theme that the L2 learner will encounter in the reading “Mayonesa adelgazante.” In Bloom’s taxonomy schema this is the lowest level, knowledge. Knowledge about the text is being provided to the student about the author and about the literary piece so that he/she may recall later in the reading.

Following the pre-reading activities students should read the literary piece. They should have some general knowledge about the author and his/her literary motifs after reading the short biography and the cultural context.

Subsequently, Bloom’s second level should come into play. Students’ understanding needs to be checked with a series of comprehension questions. This activity should ideally be organized in order of difficulty so as to ensure that the student understood the literature piece. Comprehension should include information questions that require answers in complete sentences. For example, who, why, what,

where when, and how type of questions. These types of questions require a higher level of thinking skills (Garnett 75). In “Mayonesa adelgazante” some comprehension questions may be:

“1. Normalmente la mayonesa contiene muchas calorías. Leyendo la receta, explica por qué esta mayonesa se considera ‘adelgazante.’ ¿Qué tiene o qué no tiene?”

Or,

“2. La cita que sigue la receta parece tratar de la nostalgia por la tierra natal de la narradora, cuando en realidad su nostalgia puede ser una metáfora de otra cosa. ¿Qué habrá pasado en la vida de la narradora que le dé ganas de llorar? Según el cuento, ¿qué dos cosas han cambiado en su vida?” (Rodríguez et al)

Another comprehension exercise that would indicate whether or not students have grasped the reading would be to have them summarize or retell the storyline. These activities allow the instructor to confirm whether the student was able to follow the anecdote. The comprehension section demonstrates that students are familiar with the reading in order to answer questions when specifically asked (Bloom 89). Once comprehension is established, there should be a post-reading section that takes the L2 learner beyond the text for higher level thinking. This section should consist of a combination of Bloom’s levels of application, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation.

In the post-reading section, application may require students to interpret the story or poem, reenact it from another character’s point of view to provide similarities and differences to other short stories or poems. In other words, allow students to take the information beyond the literary paradigm piece. Are students able to actually synthesize what they read and apply it to another situation? Bloom’s higher levels of taxonomy, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation, require students to go beyond the text, evaluate and debate issues stemming from the short stories or poems. The intention is to have the student think critically. In Esquivel’s short story there is mention of stereotyping women’s images. An exercise that takes the students beyond the text could be:

El concepto de la feminidad - La autora francesa Simone de Beauvoir escribió que las “mujeres no nacen; se construyen” para hablar de los conceptos de la femineidad o feminidad que tienen las sociedades. Lo que ella quería decir es que el concepto de la feminidad es algo artificial que se construye por medio de un proceso de condicionamiento, el cual se basa en las tradiciones. ¿Qué opinan ustedes? Formen grupos de cuatro personas y colaboren en la producción de una encuesta sobre los conceptos de la feminidad. También deben tratar de las diferencias entre el comportamiento de los sexos. ¿Cuáles son naturales? ¿Cuáles son artificiales? Después de preparar su encuesta, adminístrenles la encuesta a sus compañeros y compañeras. Escriban un informe de los resultados. (Rodríguez et al)

In this post-reading section written activities are ideal for the student to research and defend their positions related to the short story and yet, take a step beyond it, such as the before mentioned activity. Writing activities can vary in length and the post-reading activities will differ from author to author.

Undoubtedly, putting together a well contextualized and integrated literature class for undergraduate students requires much energy and effort on behalf of the instructor. Instructors are forced to search for works or create on their own to supplement available anthologies that only have the short stories or poems, or fall in the cracks of having only comprehension questions, or else repeat the same literary token figures. Instructors must create their own activities from scratch in order to generate a student centered literature classroom. Creating literary activities takes time; professors generally have little time to sit down and create many activities during the academic year. This could explain why the literature classroom soufflé does not rise.

Millions of dollars are invested in creating beginner level textbooks and publishing advance level literature anthologies, but little is spent on putting together and publishing literary textbooks for those L2 Spanish learners that find themselves bridging the intermediate to advanced levels in the US curriculum. The industry has lost sight of the middle child which is just as important as, or more important than, the beginning and advanced L2 learners. Those students that find themselves transitioning from intermediate to advanced are central to a make or break period to continuing as Spanish majors. There seems to be a need for more attention given in this area or more attention given to literary textbooks bridging the intermediate to advance level Spanish undergraduate L2 learners. The literary textbooks that do exist appear to fall short of enhancing cognitive literary advancement in L2 learners in this transitional stage. This article is a modest attempt to address this void that exists at the undergraduate university levels of L2 Spanish learners.

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