FUN AND FUNCTIONAL *Doing it all in the target language*

By Marissa Coulehan

Every September for nearly a decade and a half, I experience a magical moment when my kindergarten students realize that Spanish class is going to look, sound, and feel different than any other class they have taken.

As I enter their classroom on the first day with a friendly "¡Buenos días!" I see their curious faces and their squirmy bodies full of excitement. I introduce myself and my monkey hand puppet, Monito (Little Monkey), and immediately think that this is what it must be like to be a children's entertainer. While I am channeling my inner magician, clown, and singer, my students realize that I am the teacher who does not speak English, and any nervous feelings that might normally arise quickly fade away.

To set the tone for the year, I implement several structures, routines, and expectations to maintain an immersion

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environment. Getting to know my students, modeling appropriate behavior, promoting the use of target language, and singing are just some examples of how I do this. Without them, I find that students feel frustrated, anxious, and worst of all, disengaged.

I make it a priority to learn my students' names. This allows me to build a quick rapport with the class. Often I find that simply being able to say a student's name with stern eye contact is enough to redirect him or her to refocus on the lesson. Knowing my students' names also sends the message that I know who they are, and that I can and will hold them accountable for appropriate classroom behavior. I prepare a set of class popsicle sticks, each one with a student's name on it. One by one, I warmly greet each student and allow them to shake hands with or give Monito a high five by modeling what it should look like. Even though my students do not yet understand Spanish, they follow my actions and understand my tone of voice to know that this is the expectation. Each and every time a student greets the puppet in Spanish, we applaud and celebrate taking a risk and using the language. This lowers the affective filter, or the emotional variables associated with the success or failure of acquiring a second language, which is critical in the first few days of class (ELD Strategies, n.d.).

[Insert Image 1: Teacher using puppet to greet student] (Hernández, 2018)

Modeling appropriate behavior is next because inevitably a student pushes the limits, yanking on poor Monito's tail or bopping him on the head. I respond immediately by pulling the puppet back, giving him a gentle pat on the head while saying, in Spanish, that he really doesn't like that, conveying a message that this is not acceptable. I change my tone of voice and I employ my best "teacher look." Then, I allow the student a

second chance to greet him. Usually this is enough of a warning that signals I mean business, and the student greets Monito more appropriately. We applaud and praise this student to remind students that this is the desired behavior. I weave short breaks into this opening activity since greeting an entire class of students one by one can quickly get stale. After five students greet Monito, we stand up and do some stretches. I tell them to touch their toes, jump, and spin in Spanish, but they are really just following my actions. It is a fun and active way to provide input during the first few classes. Then we sit down again and continue the meet and greet. This might happen four or five times during this activity, adding a new movement each time to keep it fresh and engaging.

On day one I set up the expectation that our classroom will be a 100% target language environment. I realize that on the first day of class, students probably don't know any Spanish. That is okay because I am providing comprehensible and repetitive input so that they quickly catch on and participate. If I hear English, I immediately stop and tell them in a friendly way, "¡no comentarios en inglés!" (no comments in English!). This might happen a few times in the first class, and then it catches on to become our fun class mantra. Students begin monitoring each other and pretty soon we are all on board, using Spanish to communicate. I once had a parent stop me in the hallway and share that when her family was dining at a Mexican restaurant, the waiter came over to greet them in Spanish. She and her husband responded in English to him, and their young daughter interrupted with "¡No comentarios en inglés!"

Music is a fun and easy way to model language for students. We sing and chant a lot, especially in the first few weeks of class. We sing to start and end the class, we chant and clap to introduce ourselves, we

play the bongos while asking, "¿Cómo estás?" (How are you today?), and we sing and act out children's songs in Spanish. Some are from the target culture, and some are adapted from songs and rhymes they might already know in English. According to Curtain and Dahlberg (2016), "action-oriented songs and rhymes, especially those with humorous actions, become favorites of the children who want to recite or sing them again and again" (p. 92). Anecdotally, I notice that my students begin to use these chunks of language in their speech earlier than other words or phrases not introduced with a tune or a rhythm.

Lastly, I introduce a call and response structure so I can get their attention when needed. In a sing-song melody or chant I say, "clase, clase" (class, class) and they respond in the same way with, "Señorita" (Miss). Of course, they don't know how to

do this at first and since I'm not explaining it in English, I must model it. Initially, they tend to repeat what I say ("clase, clase"), so I use Monito to help me show them how to do it. Then I show them what I expect once they've completed the call and response. I model that I am ready to listen and learn. My eyes are looking, my ears are listening, my legs are crossed, my back is straight, and my mouth is closed. I look around to find a student who looks ready to listen and learn according to what I just modeled. Monito and I praise her by giving her a quiet thumbs up. We find a few other students to praise, and by this time all of the students know what is expected of them. Naturally, I have to repeat this expectation several times in the first few days to be consistent.

In closing, as Julie Speno (2018) of Mundo de Pepita advocated during her keynote address, my classroom should be

the safe, kind, calm, wondrous classroom of high expectations. I could not agree with her more. I encourage you to enjoy the ride and to embrace those magical moments. A children's magician might be amazing, a singer might be engaging, and a clown might be funny. But I am the teacher who gets to be all of those things and more. I get to share the gift of language with young children.

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