

SEVEN REASONS FOR THE HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHER TO USE LITERATURE TO TEACH WORLD LANGUAGES

by Augusta Gonzalez and Talia Gonzalez

Paco Peco, Chico Rico

Insultaba como un loco

A su tío Federico.

Y éste dijo:

Poco pico, Paco Peco

When I recite this tongue twister rapidly in class, everyone stops and turns to me. They are fascinated with the sounds, the speed and trying to figure out what I am saying. This simple traditional rhyme then becomes the focus of a mini lesson. What does it mean? Where is the alliteration? The rhyme? What other simile besides “como un loco” can the students create? Can the students figure out why the poem uses the imperfect? Poems like these can be used with any age group. While with older students you might dig deeper into the structure and meaning of a poem, with younger students one can simply enjoy the rhythm and rhyme of this traditional tongue twister.

Why use literature like poems, stories, riddles, newspaper articles, comic strips, picture books, books or plays to teach language? As teachers, we can all name a multitude of reasons to use literature in the classroom. However, here are my personal seven most compelling reasons for highly effective teachers to use literature in the classroom:

1. As a hook to stimulate your students
2. To present culturally relevant material
3. To thematically connect with different units and other subjects
4. To improve reading comprehension and vocabulary
5. To teach grammar in context
6. To encourage oral communication

7. To differentiate according to student abilities
Want to learn more? Keep on reading! My literature examples are in Spanish but the strategies described can be applied to any language.

THE HOOK

Why will students enjoy using literature? Because it’s interesting and fun! They don’t even realize they are learning. Some of the different characteristics that can make literature a natural hook:

Musicality: As in the “Paco Peco” example, the musicality of poetry will attract your students to both listening for comprehension and listening to meet the challenge of being able to say it themselves.

Comedy: I often use the poetry of Gloria Fuertes, such as the poem “Doña Pito Piturra Tiene Unos Guantes,” to initiate a lesson on clothing. The children enjoy the comedic elements (I usually dress up as la Doña with a hat and gloves). Later, I use the poem as a template for the children to add different clothes for her to wear. Comic strips like Mafalda often enliven the class and bring a touch of Argentine humor to students. Asterix can do the same for French classes.

Thematic relevance/interest: Alma Flor Ada’s collection of poems *Días y Días de Poesía* provides teachers with a poem or rhyme for each day of the school year from back to school to summer vacation. Ms. Ada is also the author of “*El Vuelo del Quetzal*,” a picture book of a bird flying over South America and viewing all of the wonders of the area from geography, flora and fauna to the typical artifacts of the region. I use this picture book as part of my introduction to Latin America. We travel with Google Earth to the different countries and then I read them this book. I usually simplify the text to facilitate student comprehension

but the pictures are excellent and illustrate the text beautifully.

Familiarity: American children’s books in translation like *Froggy se viste* by Jonathan London and Frank Remkiewicz and *Alexander y el día terrible, horrible, espantoso, horroroso* by Judith Viorst and Ray Cruz are both very successful choices for Spanish lessons. Firstly, the familiarity of the books is inviting for the students; and, secondly it requires less mental translation since the students know the storyline. Both of these books work well to develop vocabulary for everyday activities, clothes and the family.

Illustrations: Picture books are engaging and, in addition to telling their own story, invite students to create other versions of stories to fit the images.

CULTURAL RELEVANCY

My eighth grade essential question for the year is “What is foreign and how does foreign become familiar?” Our geographic focus is Latin America. To kick off the unit I use a one page excerpt from Esmeralda Santiago’s novel, *Cuando era puertorriqueña (When I was Puerto Rican)*. Ms. Santiago describes the nostalgic feelings that the guava fruit evokes. She describes the fear she felt when she first immigrated to the United States and the culture shock of experiencing a different climate, language and different foods. This short, one page excerpt provides the class with both a reading comprehension lesson as well as a springboard for an interesting discussion about how it feels to be foreign.

Cultural relevancy can also be found in texts that reflect daily life in other countries or special holidays in other countries. Pictures books, regardless of the age of your students, are a wonderful resource for illustrating the target culture(s). Two books I use to describe daily life are *El sancocho del sábado* by Leyla Torres and *Cuadros de familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza. The first book shows a typical Andean open market with the yucca, potatoes and live chickens as the young protagonist goes with her grandmother to shop for the ingredients of the Sancocho stew that they cook every Saturday. This book lends itself to lessons on family, food and shopping while demonstrating the geography, the close knit family structure and the foods eaten in the Andean region of South America. The Garza book can be used to teach about family traditions from Mexico.

Por fin es Carnaval by Arthur Dorros is illustrated using *arpilleras* (typical handicraft of Bolivia and other Andean countries).

The book describes a young boy preparing for Carnival and plays his Andean flute for the parade. Meanwhile, we see his family, the village, the clothes and the various musical instruments used in that area.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Interdisciplinary possibilities:

- April is Poetry month and English classes are often teaching poetry. What a perfect time to introduce some new poems to the class and have each student pick one to read at a poetry reading, tea time or to record for a podcast that parents can enjoy. My eighth grade students really enjoy *Cool Salsa: Bilingual Poems on Growing up Hispanic in the United States* (Edge Book) by Lori Marie Carlson and Oscar Hijuelos. Many of these poems include a blending of Spanish and English and give the students an idea of the bilingual world of Latinos.
- Newspaper articles can also be an easy fit for interdisciplinary readings. My classes will be using the Huffington Post in Spanish as well as articles from various Spanish and Latin American press to prepare for their mock presidential election this fall.

Using biographies:

When I teach my **Latino unit**, I use biographies in the target language, like *Cesar Chavez* by Ginger Wadsworth and Mark Schroeder and *Azúcar* (bio of Celia Cruz) by Ivar Da Coll.

- Jigsaw activity: I use the Cesar Chavez book for a jigsaw activity. Each group of students read one chapter of the book in Spanish; they answer comprehension and vocabulary questions and then they summarize the chapter together in four to six sentences. Each student, armed with his/her summary, is then jigsawed into new groups made up of one student from each chapter. Here they share their summaries and reflect on the book. This lesson takes several days but is very rewarding.
- Using transition words: Biographies are perfect for story mapping, timelines and practicing the use of transition words like: in the beginning, then, later, afterwards, finally. For example, students can share a part of the bio and the transition words on big cards can connect the retelling.

READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY

Any book can be used to teach reading comprehension and vocabulary. Don’t rule out *People en español*. It may not be high-brow literature, but the students love it and learn to read in the target language. Moreover, they can create their own magazine.

You must be careful to not select a book that is too difficult because the comprehension struggle will frustrate the reader. Scholastic magazine at www.maryglasgow.com has many readings that can be used and they are often available in novice, intermediate or advanced level.

The following activities are the same as those used to teach reading in English.

Pre-reading activities: prediction based on title or picture, cover up title and, based on pictures, have students write the title.

Teaching new vocabulary possibly with illustrations or objects (I use clothes with *Froggy se viste*).

After reading a short amount, ask questions for students to discuss, first with a partner, and then with the class. Give headlines for that section and have students select the best one.

Ask students to write down any new words in their reading journal or worksheet and use the dictionary to define them.

Provide post reading vocabulary activities such as: cloze activities, bingo, charades or drawing the new vocabulary.

Comprehension activities can include: questions, role play scenes, draw the story map, change the ending, and write a journal entry or an email as one of the characters of the book. Another option is missing gap activities which involve characters and storyline so students can reconstruct the story together. These are excellent assessments for comprehension.

GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT

Grammar is part of natural language and evident in all forms of literature. You can pick a book, poem or article for a particular grammar construct that you want to emphasize. *Froggy Se Viste* is ideal to practice the reflexive verbs while *El Arbol Generoso* by Shel Silverstein works well for teaching the imperfect tense. Fairy tales are also wonderful for highlighting the difference between the imperfect and the preterit tense. Most of the activities that we do are done in pairs or groups so that they can consult and discuss the topic. Some of the activities that I use to teach grammar points are:

- Oral reading-repeated reading and listening to natural language attunes the ear to a construct “sounding right”.
- Students are asked to identify certain

RESOURCES

Websites for different forms of literature for your language classroom

NEWSPAPERS

For any language

- www.onlinenewspapers.com

For Spanish

- www.impre.com
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/>
- www.elpais.es
- <http://www.multilingualbooks.com/online-newspapers-spanish.html>
- <http://voces.huffingtonpost.com/>

Mi pequeño día, magazine from PR for children, part of the “El nuevo día” newspaper

- <http://especiales.elnuevodia.com/mipequenodia/#>

For French

- <http://www.multilingualbooks.com/online-newspapers-french.html>
- <http://www.france24.com/fr/>

MAGAZINES

Spanish

- <http://www.maryglasgow.com> (Scholastic magazine)
- <http://quemedices.diezminutos.es/>
- <http://www.hola.com/>
- <http://www.peopleenpanol.com/pespanol/>
- <http://www.veintemundos.com/en/>

French

- <http://www.entrevue.fr/>

Children’s Literature:

- <http://MisCositas.com> (Latin American stories). Lori Langer de Ramirez fills this site with interesting and easy one-page stories by and about different Latino protagonists. The stories are glossed for the challenging vocabulary with illustrations to explain the words. I use a general worksheet with this site which asks the student to give the title, country of origin, setting, main character and a one- or two-sentence summary of the story in Spanish.
- <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/> International Children’s Library has an incredible online collection of books in many languages and various levels.
- http://books.google.es/books?id=C36S3_bqZuMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=carmen+lomas+garza&hl=es&ei=tpauTbCcC4fvsgbAyoZyDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false You can also find some on Google Books, or at least parts, like Cuadros de Familia by Carmen Lomas Garza at this link.

GREAT WIKI FOR MORE IDEAS ON HOW TO USE LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

- <http://languageinks2006.wikispaces.com/Story-based+Instruction#Books+Online>

READING MATERIALS CLASSIFIED BY NOVICE, INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED.

Spanish readings (level A2 and above)

- <http://marcoele.com/actividades/lecturas/>
- <http://cvc.cervantes.es/aula/lecturas/default.htm>

Various readings from different sites with comp q-- Spanish

- <http://aprenderespanol.org/lecturas/lecturas-ejercicios.html>

Stories illustrated and narrated by young children in Spain

- <http://www.milcuentos.com/>

Lessons with readings in multiple languages

- <http://larc.sdsu.edu/sailn/about/all-lessons>
- http://books.google.es/books?id=C36S3_bqZuMC&printsec=frontcover&dq=carmen+lomas+garza&hl=es&ei=tpauTbCcC4fvsgbAyoZyDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CC4Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false

French stories from around the Francophone world

- <http://www.conte-moi.net/contes/koumba-sans-mere>

Free children’s books in many languages

- <http://www.childrenslibrary.org/icdl/SimpleSearchCategory?ids=&langid=&pnum=1&cnum=1&ilangcode=en&ilang=English&text=&lang=French&search=Search>

Chapter Books (for heritage or advanced learners)

order texts like this easy Spanish reader through online distributors

- http://www.continentalbook.com/cbc-store/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=2_1205_2094&products_id=10229

or these for graded readers in French

- http://www.continentalbook.com/cbcstore/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=1_652_759

Folk tales

- <http://larc.sdsu.edu/sailn/about/all-lessons>

Comic Strips

- <http://www.todohistorietas.com.ar/principal.htm> (Mafalda)
- <http://www.tintin.be/#/home/home.swf> (Tin Tin)
- <http://www.asterix.com/index.html.fr?rub=français> (Asterix, switch language to English or Spanish)
- www.webcomics.es

Riddles, Proverbs and Poems

- <http://www.ocioyweb.com/refranes.htm>
- <http://www.languagerealm.com/french/frenchproverbs.php>
- <http://www.institutoCervantes.com>

grammar forms in selected text.

- For preterit vs. imperfect, I will often take sentences from the text and give the student fill ins with the choice of preterit vs. imperfect verb forms.
- Post-reading follow up activities are often reproducing a style (metaphors, alliteration, personification) or certain grammar points like using preterit tense, reflexive verbs or direct object pronouns. The D.O.P. is often used in riddles which I often have my students write in their journals. For example:

*Lo tienes en el baño
Lo usas a diario
Para tener los dientes
Blancos y limpios (respuesta: cepillo de dientes)*

ORAL COMMUNICATION

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication. We relay information but at the same time entertain. Children adore story time. Even my big 14-year-old students love to sit on the floor to hear a story. Following an initial reading, they can:

- Read aloud in groups
- Talk about the characters or parts of the story using helpful vocabulary sheets
- Answer or create comprehension questions with a partner and then share them with the class
- Create dialogues impersonating the characters of the poem or book
- Create three to four questions about the literature to use as a mini survey which they can ask paired in the language lab or in class.
- Retell the story by giving each student in a group a beginning of a sentence or a picture that triggers a certain part of the story. Students arrange themselves in order and then retell the story.

DIFFERENTIATION

Most of the activities that I mentioned in this article are done in pairs or groups allowing the teacher the opportunity to select pairs and groups thus assuring groupings of supportive students with those students with disabilities. Activities can also be selected to address the learning styles of your students: more read aloud stories for the auditory learner, drawing interpretations or story maps for the visual learner, role plays for the interpersonal learner, creating a new personal ending for the intrapersonal learner and passing the yarn or ball to retell the story for the kinesthetic learner.

If you are selecting poems or stories to

read, give students a choice, if possible.

Shorter, easier poems can be chosen, if desired, for reading and analyzing. MisCositas.com is a wonderful site because I ask my students to read three stories but they can choose to read from one paragraph to four page stories. They still need to answer the same questions about all of them.

Y Colorín Colorado este cuento se ha acabado. (And now the story is over). Those were the seven reasons, but what about the big A: Assessment?

This is evident in many of the activities that I described: from cloze activities, fill-ins to role playing of scenes. Formative and summative assessments of the vocabulary, reading comprehension, culture and grammar acquired are easy to devise. More interesting for both the students and the teacher are the performance based projects that can be done as a final follow up such as acting out scenes, creating another ending and sharing it with the class, writing a book or poem similar to the one studied but with a different twist. Last year after reading *Alexander y el día terrible, horrible, espantoso, horroroso*, my students made videos of either a terrible day or a fantastic day. They were very entertaining and full of reflexive verbs and all of the new vocabulary learned in the book and in the lessons.

I have been using literature in the classroom for the past 40 years. I used to read *Jorge el Curioso (Curious George)* by Margret and H.A. Rey in Spanish to my bilingual kindergarten class in California. I still experience the same warm feeling when sharing a poem or book with my classes. I can feel the students totally engaged and the beauty of the language is dancing around their ears.

Editor’s Note: Augusta’s daughter Talia helped her with the resources and the listing of literacy strategies while Augusta shared her personal experiences with a variety of books that she has used throughout her career.

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she has taught at all levels, from bilingual preschool to university. She credits her love of language to her personal bilingual (Italian-English) immigrant background. She has taught since 1972, and for the last 20 years she has been actively involved in mentoring student teachers. Thanks to her many years of residency in Spain, she was fundamental in setting up the two Spanish exchanges for the Glastonbury Public Schools.

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