

Did you know that Spanish is the third most commonly spoken language in the world? I did not know that until I took my first Spanish class nine years ago. I have to admit that I was more than a just a little bit intrigued by the language. I immediately thought about how cool it was that there were other people in the world communicating with one another by speaking a language that I could not understand! Little did I know back then, but after my first Spanish class, my life was changed for the better.

I continued to take Spanish classes every year in high school, and I was even fortunate enough to have been able to travel and practice speaking the language. I flew to Spain twice with the Spanish Club in my high school, and I traveled to Mexico once with my family. My language background and the experience that I acquired through traveling helped me make an easy decision when I entered. I was going to minor in Spanish!

The excitement that I had for the language continued to grow as I took classes about phonology, written expression and Spanish culture. There was such a variety of different classes offered at the University that I was able to take classes that focused on what my individual interests were. The more classes I took, the more I realized how much I desired to make Spanish a part of what I would be doing for the rest of my life, which was being an elementary teacher.

After I discovered that I would be an intern in a fifth grade classroom at Radio Park Elementary, I immediately became interested in finding out if and how foreign language was incorporated into the classroom. I learned that foreign language was not a part of what the students did at all, and I started thinking about ways that I would be able to introduce Spanish culture to the students. I realized that this would be a great

environment to introduce language in because I know that children are much more capable of acquiring a second language when they are younger rather than waiting until high school. I thought, how eager would the students be to try something new? That is what led me to my wondering for my inquiry project.

I did not decide to explore any specific wondering right away. First, I had to talk to my mentor about appropriate ways that I would be able to include the language. Since Spanish was not included in the curriculum, we knew that I would not be able to make Spanish something that the students were obligated to work on during the designated class time. Since the restriction ruled out almost all of the time during the day, I had to choose alternative times that the students might be able to meet. The time of day that I ended up choosing for Spanish was recess.

I also knew that since the option for each student would be to either go to recess or learn about Spanish culture, I wanted to make the meeting time something enticing. I decided that the time I was going to teach Spanish would be called “Spanish Club.” The Club would meet once a week during the half-hour that would normally be allotted for recess. I could not and did not want to force anyone to join that was not already internally motivated to learn Spanish, so I made joining the Club optional. The only catch was, if a student decided that he or she wanted to become a member, the student would be required to go to the Club each week from January through May. Nobody was allowed to decide after a few weeks that the Club was not worth going to anymore.

There were many questions that I had about my Spanish Club that I wanted to find answers to, but I decided on one particular wondering that I wanted to explore further. **How can students learn the most in a Spanish Club that meets only once a**

**week for a half-hour without me assessing them through tests or assigning required homework?** I knew that there were many small questions that were a part of my main wondering.

Some parts of the question that I knew I needed to explore seemed to stand out. What is more important for me when I am teaching my students: breadth or depth of each topic? What are some alternative ways that I can assess my students besides using tests? Will my students be able to learn without me assigning homework, and how will I know? There were so many questions that I wanted to find answers to, so I knew it was time to get started.

The first step that I took to put my inquiry plan into action was find out how many of my fifth grade students would be interested in joining the Spanish Club. I wanted to know why each student wanted to join the Club and what he or she wanted to learn as a part of it. This was very important to me because I wanted to take what the students said they wanted to learn and use that information to guide me in developing my lesson plans. I created a survey that my students had to take if they chose to be a part of the Club. The two fill-in parts of my one-page survey were: “I want to participate in Spanish Club because...” and “A few SPECIFIC things I hope to learn about in Spanish Club are...”

I was very excited because twenty out of the twenty-six students in my class chose to give up their recess time once a week to participate in Spanish Club. I was interested in why the other students chose not to be a part of it. When I asked them, some of the students responded that they did not want to give up recess, they had many other things to do, or they just were not interested. One student responded that he was already involved in learning Spanish outside of the classroom and he did not want to learn about things that he already knew.

Another thing that I was excited about was that there were going to be four students in the Club that were already bilingual. One of their reasons that they wanted to be in Spanish Club was that they wanted to be “trilingual.” I was very interested in seeing how the four of those students reacted to learning Spanish. I wondered if they would have an easier time than the rest of the class.

After I gathered the information on my survey I went to the library to search for books that I felt would help to guide me through my plan. I found more than ten books that focused on second language acquisition and learning Spanish, but only two books that discussed foreign language in an elementary level setting. I did not find anything about starting a Spanish Club in particular, but I was able to find a great book called *Foreign Language Learning in Primary School* that discussed how to integrate foreign language into the elementary school.

One thing that I had to do before I began developing my lessons was think about the constraints that I needed to work with because not all of the students in my class had chosen to join the club. I could not make a bulletin board of any kind or hang up posters. My mentor teacher and I juggled the idea of a collapsible bulletin board, but I would only be able to bring it out during the Club meetings. I was not allowed to set up a word wall or hang up anything around the room that was Spanish. I felt that this was unfortunate for me because it is important to surround students in the foreign language.

I used a lot of my old worksheets from high school and lesson ideas from the Internet to develop my lesson plans. I also gathered many different artifacts that I had saved from my traveling excursions to Spain and Mexico. Some of the things that I planned to use in the Club were pictures, brochures, posters and food wrappers. I had a diverse collection of Hispanic music that I also wanted to have a chance to let the children listen to as a part of introducing them to the culture. I even found some wonderful read-aloud books, such as *Say Hola to Spanish, Otra Vez*, by Susan Middleton Elya, that I could read to the students that were written using a good combination of Spanish and English.

I learned that my lessons should also focus on functional and communicative content, and thematic and intercultural content (Doye, p.10). Some examples of functional content are learning how to say greetings and expressing tastes. I wanted to plan my first lesson around teaching the students how to greet one another. A few examples of thematic and intercultural content are food, weather and clothes. I planned to use all three of those themes in the lessons I was going to teach.

Since I read that teaching Spanish includes a lot more than just teaching the language, I thought that I would spend the first meeting having the students identify Spain and Mexico on the map. I also wanted to include some culture in the lesson by having the students choose Hispanic names from a list that had. I remembered how much I loved choosing a different name when I was in high school, and I knew by the excited looks on their faces that the kids were just as excited, if not more. The names that they chose were the names that I called them during our time in Spanish Club.

When the students were done picking their names, I passed out a folder and notebook to each of the students that were to be used for Spanish Club only. I told the kids that since the Club was not going to be a part of any kind of grade they would receive, that they did not ever need to take notes if they did not want to, but that I highly recommended writing down anything I wrote on the board. I also told everyone that I would pass out optional “homework” each week that would be helpful in learning the language, but that was not going to count against them. I made it clear that students could have as much extra practice work as they needed. All they had to do was ask me for it. I taught the students how to introduce themselves in Spanish and I gave them all a

chance to practice introducing themselves out loud. I wanted to get a lot more done in the half-hour, but the time seemed to disappear faster than I had anticipated.

It did not take me long to catch-on to the fact that I was planning too many things for each Club meeting than we all actually had time for. During the second week of Spanish Club, I wanted everyone to review by re-introducing themselves in Spanish by taking turns going around in a circle. I also wanted to teach them the numbers 1-10 by singing a song in Spanish called, “The Spanish Numba Rumba,” and I wanted to introduce new words and practice them. Many of the students seemed to enjoy the activity. I was a little nervous about the song because it was from a compact disc called *Sesame Street Fiesta*, but the students told me they did not mind. The song was very catchy and by the second time through, all of the students could follow along with no problems. I barely had enough time to get through the song to think about introducing new words.

The next week, I planned a read-aloud, an activity to go along with the read-aloud, an explanation of cognates to go along with the book, a brief overview of Mexico and an introduction to the colors in Spanish. I was very excited about the lesson before I taught it, but since I wanted to fit everything in, I felt like I was very rushed and I was not able to hit on any one topic as well as I should have in order for the students to learn. My supervisor watched the lesson and I was able to talk with her about it afterwards. She helped me realize that although I want to teach the children as much as I can; maybe I should focus more on one thing each lesson and go more in-depth instead of teaching too many different things at once.

I decided to try that approach for the following meeting and I felt much better about how much the students were learning. I taught my students about the names of the different body parts in Spanish, and we did a sentence building activity in a circle as a large group. One student would say a sentence in Spanish about his or her body parts, and the next student would need to repeat the sentence or sentences and create a sentence to add on. I felt that the more we talked about one thing, the more it made sense to the students because they were able to make connections. From the fourth week on, I picked only a few things to teach the class about instead of glazing over many separate things.

Since my lessons started to move along more smoothly, I realized that it was time for me to start discovering how much my students were learning. It was time for me put some deep thought into assessment. I told the students before the Club meetings started that I was not going to test them so I had to figure out alternate ways to assess my students.

The first thing I thought about was playing bingo. I played bingo in Spanish all throughout high school as a way to figure out what words I knew and what words I didn't. I thought that I could give my students a review list of words that they should know and a bingo card to fill out with one of the review words in each box. The game would be played like bingo except I would call out words instead of numbers. I would assess the students by keeping track of who won. I would also pay attention to who was able to recognize the words I called by covering them on their sheets.

Another thing that I started doing from the very first lesson was keeping track of who was turning in the optional homework. I corrected the homework that the students turned in to me and noticed how many questions each student answered correctly. I

found that although keeping track of homework was a good way to assess the students who were actually turning in the homework, there was no way for me to know if the other students were learning because they weren't turning anything in. The optional homework turned out to be more of a measure of which students were motivated to learn and which ones were not.

Shortly after I started brainstorming about ways to assess my students, I learned about the International Baccalaureate program that is offered at the Streams Elementary School in the Upper Saint Claire School District outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The focus of the content in that elementary school is expanded to include cultural connections. Within the school, there is a Spanish teacher named Valerie Ober who teaches Spanish to the students in grades K-4 on a weekly basis. I set-up a time for me to visit the school so that I could talk with Valerie about how she teaches Spanish to her students and ideas about how I could assess my class.

I was able to watch her teach a fourth grade class and she gave me some fabulous ideas about things that I could do in my Club. The first thing that I noticed about how she taught her class was that everything she said to the students was said in Spanish, and all of the students responded using Spanish. I was astonished by how great each student's Spanish accent was. They all sounded like native speakers! When I brought-up this observation with Valerie, she told me that the students' accent was due to the fact that they have all been taking Spanish class since they were in Kindergarten.

The students also started the class by singing songs that reviewed the names of the months and the days of the week in Spanish. The songs were both very simple and they were sung to the tune of "The Addams Family." The students knew the two songs by

rote, and according to Valerie, singing is a fantastic way to teach and review Spanish. I felt very encouraged when she said that because I used a song to teach the numbers in Spanish in one of my earlier lessons.

Valerie Ober taught me about how to use games like Spanish bee and student “interviews” to evaluate each student’s progress. Another fun idea that she suggested that I would like to try sometime is having students practice skits in the classroom. The students would learn the Spanish through play. Valerie also gave me sample rubrics that she uses so that I would have an idea about what to look for when working with the students. Unfortunately, I would not be able to use the rubrics in the exact way that she uses them since my Club members have only been learning Spanish for a short period of time. However, I had a much better idea about what I should use as a base for my assessments.

I wanted to know if the students ever had any homework to supplement their lessons. Valerie told me that fourth grade was the first year that the students are given any homework. Until then, the students never do any written work because writing and seeing the words interferes with learning how to speak the language (V. Ober, personal communication, March 10, 2004). She said that the students are still too involved with trying to learn how to write and speak English that trying to write in Spanish would cause too much confusion. All of the work and progress from grades K-3 is assessed orally.

One of the ideas that Valerie Ober gave me was a using a game called “review baseball” to review words with the students. Review baseball is played inside of the classroom, and this game is very much like real baseball (except the students that play do not need to be good at hitting a ball!) The class is split in half into two different teams.

When one team is “up,” the other team is in the “outfield.” One person from the team that is up stands at “home plate.” The teacher asks the student if he or she wants to try for a single, a double or a triple (the words get harder at each level.) The pitcher, which in this case is the teacher, says a word in English to the “batter.” If the batter answers correctly, he or she may move around the classroom to the base that he or she has earned. If he or she answers incorrectly, the other team has a chance to answer for one bonus point, and the batter is out. Like real baseball, three outs mean that the other team is up. Classroom management is maintained throughout the game because if the students are talking, a bonus point is taken away. Another way the class remains calm is that nobody is allowed to cheer. The way that the teams show enthusiasm is by waving their palms, also called “spirit hands.”

When I experimented with using review baseball as an assessment technique with my class, everyone loved it so much that they begged to play it again the next week! I was thrilled that my students thought they were only playing a game when I was actually using it as a way to test my students. During each of the two weeks that we played the game, all of the students were participating and I did not even offer a reward to the winning team. Everyone was playing for the good of their team instead of an individual reward! I wished that I had experimented more with using different sorts of games to assess my students earlier in the course of the Club meetings.

Throughout the weeks that I held Spanish Club, I collected data in various ways. One primary way that I collected information was by keeping a journal after each meeting about what we did and what my thoughts and reactions were. I also kept track of the homework that each student turned in and whether or not each student participated in

class or won a game each week. I kept a Spanish suggestion box in the back of the room where students were encouraged to put notes in about things they liked or disliked about the Club. I sent surveys home to parents after the Club had been functioning for three months and I also had each student member complete a different survey for me. I sent the surveys to the parents because I even collected the student folders and notebooks to see who was writing things down as notes. My supervisor, Kelly Reilly-Kaminski, also helped me by taking notes on her observations of my lessons.

The suggestion box never had more than one or two things ideas in it each week. Most of the suggestions toward the beginning of the meetings were about what names the students thought we should call our Club mascot (a little stuffed mouse dressed in Mexican attire that said funny phrases when anyone pressed his belly.) We all voted on the suggestions and decided on the name “Queso,” which means “cheese” in Spanish. We all thought that was a very fitting name because mice like cheese! I found one particular suggestion in the box that suggested I try to incorporate more games into the classroom. I found that suggestion before I met with Valerie Ober, and that one particular suggestion was what gave me the motivation to travel to Upper Saint Claire.

Since I had so many different pieces of data to analyze, I had to find ways to consolidate the data so that it was easier for me to interpret. The data that I had collected in my record book that kept track of who was turning in what homework and who was participating in class was easy to read. I did not think I had to do anything about that. I also saved all of the journals that I had written about each Club meeting, so I could easily go back to the journal and find out about my thoughts.

On the other hand, the final surveys that I gave to the Club members and their parents were a little bit harder to make sense of. I decided that for the surveys that I gave to my students, I would make ten different sheets with one of each of the ten questions on each sheet. Then, I would go through all of the surveys and write down what each student said for the question on each of the ten pieces of paper. I thought that once I had all of the answers grouped together, I would have a much easier time making sense of my data. I did the same thing for the parent surveys except that since many of their questions had to be answered by choosing a number on a scale, I just averaged the final number that I had for each question.

I learned a lot of valuable information about my initial wondering through holding my Spanish Club meetings.

**CLAIM 1:**

When homework is not a required part of learning Spanish, a lot of time should be set aside for students to practice using the language orally in order for the students to learn the most.

**EVIDENCE:**

When I went to Upper Saint Claire to talk with Valerie Ober, I learned that since the students did not have homework until fourth grade, the majority of the class time was spent listening to and practicing speaking Spanish. The children need to use the language in order to move towards fluency, and if they are not required to complete homework, they need to be required to practicing speaking to one another so that the phrases become more second nature to them.

Since I never required homework as a part of the Club because the membership was optional, I decided to take Valerie's advice and set aside more time for the students to practice speaking the language with each other. For the lesson that I created the week after I visited Upper Saint Claire, I devoted only a small period of time in the beginning of the Club for me to teach the students words. Half of the time was set-aside for the students to practice using the phrases and words in pairs. As the students were practicing, I circulated among the pairs and had the chance to listen to all of the students speak. Just by listening, I could tell that as the minutes passed, the phrases were

becoming easier for the students to say and they were saying them faster instead of having to pause and think so much. When a student pronounced a word wrong, I would not tell them that it was said wrong. I would simply say the word correctly and look at him or her, and then he or she would try to repeat it correctly.

According to Peter Doye, the objective for teaching a foreign language in the elementary school “is not to teach a foreign language but to teach how to communicate in a foreign language (p. 9)”. After I read this I realized it was more important for me to give my students time to practice communicating. Before, I think I was too preoccupied on teaching my students as much as possible that I put the practicing on the backburner. I realized after the lesson that my priorities should have been the other way around. I should have been giving my students more time to practice so that everything I was teaching them was meaningful.

## **CLAIM 2:**

Team games that the whole class participates in, like review baseball, motivate the students to study for themselves and for their team.

## **EVIDENCE:**

I watched a fourth grade class play “review baseball” while I was at Streams Elementary School visiting the Spanish class. Even though only one student was “up” at one time, all of the students were quiet and thinking about the answers to themselves. I could tell when a student knew a word because he or she would look at the teammates

with wide eyes and could barely stay in his or her seat. I even saw kids so nervous that their teammate would not guess correctly that they were practically biting their nails off! Valerie told me that the students love playing games such as “review baseball” because they all feel motivated to study. Nobody wants to do poorly when they are a part of a team!

I hoped that my students would react the same way when I tried to implement the baseball game into my classroom. I explained to the students a week before the game, how the game was going to work. I passed out a list of words that the students should study and they all seemed very excited. The day of the game, the students were all trying to do more last minute studying while they were eating lunch. Just like I had hoped, my students reacted the exact same way as the students at Upper Saint Claire. Everyone was so excited and they like playing the game so much that they all wanted to play it again during the Club meeting the next week! When I asked them if they liked the game, I heard an overwhelming “YEAH!” The reason the students said they liked the game so much was that it gave them a reason to study and it helped them learn the words that they did not know as well because they were able to listen to everyone else.

### **CLAIM 3:**

Music is a very effective vehicle for student learning.

### **EVIDENCE:**

I learned that music helps children learn when I used the song, “The Spanish Numba Rumba” in one of my Club meetings. I printed the words to the song and gave a

copy of the words to each student. I played the song and had the children use the copy of the words that I gave them to sing along with the song. By the third time through the song, some of the students did not need to look at their words, and those who did were able to sing the chorus without using the words, which was the most important part of the song. When I asked my students who enjoyed singing the song, almost all of the students raised their hands. After the class, one of the students that did not raise her hand for enjoying the song approached me and told me that she did not like singing because it made her feel like she was in a lower grade.

Although my fifth graders had mixed feelings about the song, the fourth graders in Streams Elementary all seemed like they were thoroughly enjoying the songs that they were singing. Everyone was participating in the song and they seemed very enthusiastic. Their songs were so catchy that I felt the need to join in, too!

#### **CLAIM 4:**

Students are more interested in learning content when they can make connections between what they know and what I am teaching them.

#### **EVIDENCE:**

In one of my Spanish Club lessons, I started to explain to the students a few things about the differences in Spanish and English grammar. In English, the adjective comes before the noun, but in Spanish, most times the noun will come before the adjective. After I gave a few examples to the class, two of my Korean bilingual students raised their

hands and told me that the Korean language is very similar to the Spanish language because their adjectives come after the nouns. This prior knowledge of how to piece together Spanish words to create sentences helped my Korean students to understand this part of the language faster than some of my other students. I know this because many of the other students in my class who are not bilingual had questioning looks on their faces and raised their hands to ask me questions, like why does that happen. The Korean students wanted to learn more grammar but I could not move on because I wanted to wait until most of the other students were ready to move on, too.

During another one of my lesson when I was talking about the culture in Mexico, I passed around some artifacts that I had saved from my trip that I had taken there. Some of the things that I passed around were empty food wrappers, like a Doritos bag. The Doritos were chile flavored and everything on the wrapper was written in Spanish. The students were so enthralled with the wrapper because they were able to compare it to the Doritos here in the United States. The class wanted to know why the Doritos were not chile flavored in Pennsylvania. The students also had no idea that Doritos even existed in other countries! After I picked all of the students' jaws up off of the floor, I was able to have a great conversation about culture with the class because I had everyone's attention. The students were interested in hearing what I had to say because they thought it was interesting.

**CLAIM 5:**

Students are more willing to participate in Spanish Club when they know there are no negative consequences involved.

## EVIDENCE:

The final surveys that I analyzed at the culmination of my inquiry project were incredibly informative about this claim. The main theme that threaded through my students' responses on their surveys proved to me that almost every single one of them would have liked Spanish Club to be at another time other than recess. One of the many comments that one of my students made about this read, "I'm glad I'm a part of Spanish Club, but sometimes I wish I could go outside, to be truthful." Although many of the students would have liked to have been outside for that time, I feel very excited that my students were willing to sacrifice that time to be a part of the Club.

The parent also noted similar comments on their surveys. One parent wrote, "If it [the Spanish Club,] didn't interfere with recess, he would really like it." The fact that the students are even sharing information like this with their parents shows me that my students would be even more enthusiastic about learning information about other cultures if they knew why would not be getting something taken away from them, including recess!

I found more information to support this claim after I thought about participation for a little bit. Although many of the students and parents noted on their final surveys that homework should be required in order to increase student learning, many of the students joined in the first place because they knew that homework was not a necessary part of the Club, and I was not going to test them and assign a grade to their work within the Club. In the beginning, before I let students sign-up for the Club, I mentioned that

there would be opportunities to do homework. There would be work that they could do that I would correct, but the work would not be graded.

**CLAIM 6:**

Teaching about one topic for an entire Club period is more beneficial for my students than teaching about a few topics for shorter periods of time.

**EVIDENCE:**

My supervisor helped to lead me to this claim after I had the third Club meeting. She came into the class to observe me, and she took anecdotal notes of what I was doing and what was happening during my lesson. I had many different things planned for the Club period, too many, in fact, and we sat down to talk about the lesson together after I had finished. She said that perhaps I was trying to plan too much in such a short period of time, and that maybe I should think about planning less and spending more time on each individual topic. My first response was a bit defensive. Of course I wasn't planning too much! I had a half-hour to teach the students as much as possible! After I maulled the idea over in my head for a little while I realized that my supervisor might have just helped me realize one of the most important things yet. It was not how much I taught my students but how well I taught them that really mattered.

I decided to change my approach for my next lesson. I planned on introducing a few body parts vocabulary words and then doing a group activity with the students to help give them more practice with what I was teaching them. After the lesson I realized that even though I spent a lot of time working with the students and the new vocabulary, I

still felt like the students needed more practice with the words before they had mastered them. I thought about the big picture. If I spent so much time in one lesson talking about only a few different things and I still felt the students needed practice, then how did I expect my students to master everything that I would try to teach them if I crammed the meetings with as much information as I tried to the week before? I immediately knew that spending more time on a few things was more effective and beneficial for my class.

After I looked at all of my claims, I began to see that they are all very applicable to any subject that I would try to teach in my classroom. Although I cannot apply all of my claims to things that I would do in every subject all of the time, I have found many parallels among some of them. For example, I discovered that team games are very motivating to the students in Spanish Club. An appropriate review game for any other subject, like social studies, could probably be just as motivating.

I was able to do a lot with the small period of time that I had for my Spanish Club, but I would change some things if I could do the whole thing over again in the future. The very first thing that I would change is I would involve the parents more. I did not want the students to be pressured by their parents to do homework since I wanted to see how willing the class was to do work on their own. However, when the parents returned their surveys to me at the end of my project, I found that most of them were very excited and wished they knew more about the Club.

Another thing that I wish I could change was the amount of time the Club met and when it met. I would like to meet more than a half-hour per week and I learned through student surveys that many of the Club members would like to have more time, too! I would also try my hardest to find a time when I could hold the Club that would not interfere with something else that is desirable, like recess.

Throughout the course of my project, I worked very hard to learn as much as possible to help me answer my original wondering. I was very excited when I started collecting data and making sense of it in terms of my wondering. Something that dawned on me while I was answering my question was that although I was answering one large question, I was developing so many more! These are some of my new wonderings that I hope to explore in my years to come as a professional:

\*How would my lessons and assessments change if I had more time for each Spanish Club period?

\*How would using the language throughout each day in the classroom affect language acquisition?

\*How can I teach English grammar skills through Spanish?

\*What teaching strategies are most effective when teaching a second language to students in a different grade?

\*What skills can I teach my students through Spanish Club, (for example, using a dictionary,) and how can I do it?

All of the time and work that I have put into my inquiry project has been more worthwhile than I had ever imagined. I have learned so much valuable information about creating and continuing a Spanish Club in my classroom, and I am sure that I will be able to apply that knowledge to whomever I am teaching next year. I want to take what I have learned this year and grow from it by exploring some of my new wonderings as well as continuing to explore my current wondering in more depth.