How may I better help students become successful readers of Spanish?
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Introduction
The first year that Spanish was added to the International Baccalaureate Program at Annandale High School, I agreed to teach the course. My goal for that year was to better prepare the students for their scheduled testing in their second and final year of the program. The IB Program at Annandale High School for Spanish is Language A, which is the first language/or, acquired language of the student. This class has 16 students, 9 males, and 7 females. The other, Language B, is the second or third language studied/learned in a classroom setting. In this class, there are 21 students. The class consists of 13 females, and 8 males. One of the components of their testing involves “text handling,” or how well the students are able to comprehend and use material they have read.

Focus
I feel that through reading the students will be better able to acquire and learn language. My goal is not only mastery in the language, but also to help the students build their confidence in what they already know. Initially, I was under the impression that grammar mastery would help them be successful; therefore, I focused on activities and methodology that centered primarily on grammar skills. Now in the second semester of their first year of the IB Program, I have re-discovered that the best way for the students to improve their reading skills is through reading.

This year the students in the Spanish IB program are in their junior year of high school. Most of the students will be assessed next year as seniors. However, two students opted to test this year, and both students made prior arrangements with the school’s IB coordinator. Their decision to test earlier than the rest of the class, at first, made me uncomfortable because I felt they might benefit on the exam with the two-year preparation the rest of the class will get. I thought that they would be at a disadvantage because they would lack those extra months of study and practice. In addition, it made me feel that I had to adjust my lesson plans to assure they would be prepared this year. Fortunately, their decision to test early turned out to be a blessing. I was able to go through the testing process with only two students instead of a whole class. The process seems to be lengthy because it requires a lot of paperwork and some online time, for example, a prediction of the student’s exam grade is needed.

One of the students came after school regularly throughout the year for additional help. The other, a Spanish Immersion student, only came for practice one day a week prior to the test date with samples of previous years tests. I plan
to follow this procedure, where students will be required to come after school for individual interviews and review sessions.

Preparing for the IB Test

The IB testing components are oral, (tape recorded with the teacher), essay writing, and reading comprehension. I have found that teaching speaking and writing usually improve with practice and modeling. The most troublesome, or difficult to teach for me is reading. Included in reading methodology among other aspects are vocabulary, and culture. As in English, words may have more than one meaning, which may impede reading comprehension. The understanding of the target culture or lack thereof may help or impede student’s comprehension. It is impossible to teach every possible word or every Spanish-speaking cultural aspect.

I focused instead on test taking skills for reading. We reviewed the STIGS Approach in class, taken from “Authentik,” a language learners’ newspaper. This newspaper also included sample tests that we used in class. The acronym stands for:

**SCAN**- Scan for specific information
**THINK**- Think about the topic
**IGNORE**- Ignore the words you don’t need to know
**GUESS**- Guess at the words you don’t know
**SEARCH**- Search for clues and synonyms

As mentioned earlier, we read a lot in class. I discouraged outside classroom reading. I felt it was important for me to see how each student handled their reading problems. Many students insisted on looking for unknown words in the dictionary. Others insisted that I always give a summary of the reading. Yet there were a few who practiced the test taking reading skills I hoped they would all develop. I tried to let the students understand that on the actual test, they are unable to use a dictionary, and they do not get a preview of the reading. However, I usually included brief background information to longer readings, such as folktales, and short stories. I encouraged the students to take the practice tests from the book as if they were taking the actual test.

Initially, the students were uneasy when taking these tests. To lessen their anxiety I later did not assign them a letter grade. I usually assigned a completion grade. This method of grading made the students more relaxed about making mistakes, and more willing to apply the reading skills.

Additional Approaches

Another reading comprehension method used was to provide the audio recording and a copy of the script. The students were able to read and listen to a short story. Initially, I was concerned that the students would find the tone of the storyteller and the tape-recording juvenile, but they all said they liked the story very much. I plan to include many more recorded stories next year.
Another helpful method was to provide a videotape of an assigned reading. The students were eager to finish reading the book copy of the novel because they wanted to see the video. Prior to viewing the video, I included a project where they had to use the author’s descriptions to draw/illustrate the main characters, and their favorite scene. An interesting aspect was that some of the students were disappointed. A few of the students commented, “I had envisioned, Eréndira, the main character of the novel in a different way”. Others said that they drew her prettier than the actor who played her part.

Journaling

All of my students also write regularly in class in their journals. I plan to keep the two IB classes journals until next year. These journals will be part of their portfolio. These journals enabled the students an opportunity not only to write, but also to read each other’s entries periodically, and respond with specific and objective feedback.

As a prewriting class assignment, these were steps we followed:

1) Students were usually asked to write about a specific topic.

2) Later, at home they were to do an Internet web search based on their class writing. Thus, they had to read the information, and then determine if it would be helpful to support their draft they started in class.

3) Their peers read their drafts, and included their name.

4) Then, I read the corrections their peers provided, and I also added remarks to these corrections.

5) Finally, I made a copy of their rough draft, then, the students were asked to only make the noted corrections. Because I found that most students would add new mistakes once they finalized their writing, I copied their final draft before the assignments were taken out of the class. This final step of copying their draft I did it because I found that students would correct the mistakes pointed out, but then would add new information with new mistakes.
The Future

For school year 2002-2003 I may be assigned the same two IB classes. As I mentioned earlier many of the activities used during the second semester this year, I plan to continue because I found them to be helpful.

My focus will still be specific reading skills, however, I need to find a method to include more personal interviews for individual academic concerns.

Another aspect I need to include is mini-sessions after school, or during FLEX. FLEX is offered every other day and it is similar to a study hall. I will like to plan the sessions so the students may be required to attend. Unfortunately, during FLEX, graded assignments cannot be given.

Finally, include guest speakers, singer, and poets to class. As a reading assignment, include a biography, any other anecdotal note on the planned guest. Later, follow up with a writing assignment of the speech or song. Last, each student would peer edit each other’s writing with feedback.

References