

Foreign language assistants: An opportunity to develop our students' intercultural competence



The foreign language assistant can be a wonderful asset when helping students develop their oral skills in a foreign language. But they can also offer them the opportunity to become global citizens. The experience of speaking and collaborating with a language assistant allows students to develop their intercultural competence, which is incredibly important in today's world.



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How do we acquire the ability to work with others? The ability to travel and speak with people from other countries? How do we develop the skills that are required to understand and work with people from other cultures? Some people may think that this comes with life experience. But, wouldn't it be wonderful to gain this experience from early childhood? Many of our children and students now have the opportunity to speak and collaborate with foreign people due to the presence of foreign language assistants in the classroom. They come from many different countries, mainly English-speaking countries but also French and German, and they are here to help children learn the foreign language. However, they can do much more than that; they can help them become global citizens.

There are two main objectives for plurilingual education: linguistic competence and intercultural competence (Council of Europe, 2003). The latter is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that allow a person to recognize, understand, interpret and accept other ways of living and thinking that are different from their own. This competence is separate from linguistic competence and just as important. Developing intercultural competence permits us to mediate between our culture and another in order to reach greater understanding, to identify

and make use of communication strategies, and to go beyond stereotypes that often inhibit effective communication.

Intercultural competence is present in the Spanish curriculum in the form of objectives in each educational stage. For example, one objective in Primary Education is "to be aware of, understand and respect different cultures and differences among people." In the subject of First foreign language, importance is placed on preparing young people to thrive in a "society which is becoming more and more interdependent and global." Learning a foreign language is, of course, an essential piece of the puzzle within this framework, but it is equally important to acquire "adequate sensitivity to the diversity that exists in our society, in accepting differences as an enriching factor, and in developing empathy, tolerance and esteem toward other cultural identities" [author's translations].

How can we achieve this? Learning a foreign language does not automatically make a person more sensitive, empathetic and tolerant. According to Michael Byram (1997), the intercultural communicative competence consists of five *savoirs*, related to knowledge and skills: 1) *savoirs*, knowledge of self, others and societal interaction; 2) *savoir être*, curiosity and willingness to look beyond one's own beliefs; 3) *savoir comprendre*, the ability to



WALKING TOGETHER

How parents can help develop their children's intercultural competence

Travelling is one clear way to expose our children to different cultures, but our limited time and resources don't always allow it. Nevertheless, there are many helpful things we can do at home, such as:

- Hang a world map and refer to it whenever we meet a foreign person.
- Learn to say "hello", "thank you" and "goodbye" in different languages.
- Read stories, watch films and listen to music from a variety of cultures.
- Try out games and sports that come from other countries.
- Reflect about our own traditions and customs from time to time.
- Be positive when referring to people of different origins and those with varying levels of mental or physical ability.
- Avoid comments that promote cultural stereotypes.
- Express curiosity about others' cultural traditions and look for more information on the Internet.
- Help them distinguish between factual and opinion-based resources on the Internet.
- Ask foreign people that we know about their experiences in a respectful way.

understand and interpret a document or event from another culture and to explain it and relate it to one's own culture; 4) *savoir apprendre/faire*, the ability to acquire new knowledge of other cultures and apply one's knowledge, skills and attitudes spontaneously; 5) *savoir s'engager*, the ability to critically evaluate the perspectives, practices and products of other cultures as well as one's own culture. This last *savoir* encompasses the other four as it is more cognitively demanding and can only be achieved once a person has developed the others. Thus, it is clear that intercultural competence is quite complex, as well as valuable, for a global society such as ours.

How might we help our students develop this competence? Below there is a series of proposed activities in which the language assistant plays a key role. Each activity corresponds to one of the *savoirs* so that we may develop each aspect of the intercultural communicative competence.

Cultural knowledge

At the beginning of the school year the language assistant may present information about him or herself, to which they can add throughout the year in the form of short cultural presentations. The purpose is to motivate students to interact with the assistant and ask him or her questions in order to learn more. The cultural presentations may focus on various topics: a typical day in their home country; the transportation that is used in the area; timetables for meals, work and rest; their family members and ancestry; school subjects, educational spaces and celebrations; their groups of friends; their home city or state and its location and characteristics. There are endless possibilities for topics that would be interesting and useful to students. The teacher should offer guidance regarding the presentations and suggest that they be as visual as possible and appropriate for the linguistic abilities of the students. It is important that the teacher be as clear as possible in his or her suggestions giv-

en that language assistants often do not have prior teaching experience or training.

Curiosity toward others

One typical activity that allows students to practice asking questions is called "hot seat". It involves one person sitting at the front of the room in the hot seat while the students ask them personal questions. In this game, the person is typically asked to pretend he or she is a famous or noteworthy person from history, but in this case the focus will be on the language assistant. Students can ask him or her about experiences in the home country, based on their previous conversations, cultural presentations, or what they've studied in class. They might also ask the assistant about his or her experience in Spain, how they felt upon arrival, and what is seen as different or interesting as compared to what is done in their home country. In this way, students learn to see their own culture through a foreigner's eyes, and they are developing empathy. This activity also encourages students to develop curiosity about others and interest in getting to know more about foreign customs and traditions.



TEACHERS' AQORA

Do you take advantage of the language assistant (LA) in your classroom? Answer the following questions to find out.

- ↘ Do I know my LA's hobbies and personal interests and preferences?
- ↘ Do I know what my LA has studied and what s/he would like to do in the future?
- ↘ Have I given my LA time to observe the students at the beginning of the school year?
- ↘ Do I plan a specific role for the LA for the classes in which s/he participates?
- ↘ Do I encourage the LA to suggest ideas and resources for my classes?
- ↘ Do I give the LA the class plans in advance so that s/he may make suggestions?
- ↘ Have I placed my LA in contact with other LAs so that they might share ideas and resources?
- ↘ Do I have a systemized way to save the resources and activities that my LA creates so that I may use them again in the future?
- ↘ Do I dedicate time to offering constructive feedback to my LA about his/her participation in the classroom?
- ↘ Do I speak regularly to my colleagues to find out how they use our school's LAs in their classrooms?
- ↘ Do I encourage the LA to talk with students while they are working at their desks or playing on the playground?
- ↘ Have I asked the LA to correct my speaking and pronunciation whenever necessary?

The use of authentic materials

When first contacting the language assistant in the summer, the school may ask the language assistant to bring everyday materials that could later be used in class. Once the language assistant is in the school, he or she can also be asked to help look for materials online. Useful materials would include advertisements (print or videos), maps of public places (an amusement park, a city, a state park), tourist guides for their city or nearby attractions, entrance tickets (to the cinema, a museum or a local festival), transportation tickets (for a train or airplane), souvenirs from a sporting event, newspapers, magazines, and restaurant menus. These objects can be used as prompts for a communicative activity in which students replicate authentic communication in the classroom. They can also serve as models for a final product that students must create in task-based or project-based learning. The idea is that students get used to seeing and using objects from another culture and that they learn to interpret the materials that explain other customs. For example,

students might be asked to identify symbols that are international (such as those used for restrooms) and others that are local symbols in order to contrast them with those used in their own country.

Research

Students can choose a topic that they have found interesting from the hot seat activity or the cultural presentations in order to carry out further research with the language assistant's help. The assistant can probably guide them in searching for reliable sources and can offer his or her own opinion to compare and contrast it with those that are found elsewhere. Students might search for more information about a local festival, the reasons behind something they found to be interesting, or the historical origin of a local monument. They might even conduct empirical research through a brief, simple survey that can be sent to the assistant's family and friends in order to find out opinions about current events. The key is that students research whatever interests them in order to spark their curiosity and motivate them to find out more. With the research results, students can create a poster to hang in the classroom or the hallway, write a post to the class or school blog, or create a newsletter to send to their parents or to another class. When they share this information with other Spanish people, they are practicing intercultural mediation.

Spain for foreigners

It is often difficult for a person to explain his or her own cultural practices in a foreign language, but it is a key step in gaining a different perspective from which to critically evaluate one's own culture and that of others. For this reason, students can be asked to explain Spanish cultural phenomena to the language assistant, such as their town's festival, Easter Week, *Carnaval*, long weekends (*puentes*) during the year and summer vacation, patron saints of their town or city, and typical foods from their area. Language assistants have not been in Spain for long, and they are often curious about

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Spanish culture. This gives students the perfect excuse to research these traditions, if necessary, and explain them to the assistant. In addition, by explaining concepts like a *puente* (when referring to a long weekend) or everything involved in an Easter Week procession, they will practice the strategy of circumlocution, explaining a concept that does not have a direct translation in another language. This is one of several communicative strategies that are important to develop in order to maintain fluid communication.

Whenever possible, language assistants should be offered the opportunity to participate in school activities so that they can add a different perspective to whatever takes place. They can, perhaps, add another dimension through their own activities, songs and traditions in order to make the event more intercultural. Even their presence may encourage students to look at the event from another perspective, more so if we ask them to explain what is happening or include the assistant in the festivities. To top it off, the assis-

tants will feel more valued and accepted by the school community, which will create a better working relationship.

It is clear that the presence of the language assistants in the classroom and the school create a situation in which everyone is obliged to speak English, a dynamic which only exists artificially between teachers and students who share the same mother tongue. For this reason, we need to take advantage of their presence in order to create opportunities for authentic communication and cultural exchanges that will be meaningful to our students. Little by little, through many moments of negotiation of meaning to understand each other's ideas, students are developing the intercultural communicative competence that will be extremely helpful when they later travel and meet foreign people in their personal and professional lives•



Spanish version ▲

NOT LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE A LANGUAGE ASSISTANT?

Look for another way to hold an intercultural exchange with another classroom around the world:

- eTwinning (a European initiative that connects classrooms)
- Connecting Classrooms (British Council)



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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We have been talking about

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