8.5 Spice Up Your Class with a Touch of Realia and a Dash of Culture

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One way to help make lecture and discussion material relevant and interesting for students is to use realia (real-life objects). Using props in the classroom and bringing in real-life examples and illustrations can make otherwise abstract material be relevant, personalized and real. Let me show you what I mean.

I have found props to be very useful in language instruction. For example, in one of my Spanish 102 classes, we were discussing the benefits of leading a healthy lifestyle. When I began to brainstorm about ways I could make the vocabulary words from the book come to life, it dawned on me that the answer was in the trunk of my car. My gym bag became the springboard for a conversation about living a healthy lifestyle. We talked about the importance of exercise, going to the gym, and eating a balanced diet, as well as ways to reduce stress. On a different day I brought my overnight bag to class to review reflexive verbs. A toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb, soap, and shampoo, provided a great review of verbs and vocabulary, but also a great segue into related topics, like how often you brush your teeth, where you buy your toothpaste, and so on. It also gave us the chance to discuss differences and similarities among Hispanic cultures.

Culture is an integral part of any foreign language classroom, and now, thanks to the World Wide Web it is easier than ever to bring authentic culture into the hands of our students. It is very easy to convert a traditional PowerPoint presentation into a culturally enriched lesson. Rather than simply presenting a slide of an ordinary house, I present Frida Kahlo’s house or perhaps La Casa Rosada (the Argentine version of the White House). My students no longer see a generic overhead of the family, instead they meet the Spanish Royal family. And instead of simply learning about the geography and history of Colombia, they are asked to describe their favorite painting by Fernando Botero, mention some of the works by Gabriel García Márquez, and write a playlist of music for a Colombian Independence Day celebration.

Students not only relate better to real-life examples than to generic examples, they also appreciate the variety. It is not always possible to use props in every lesson, but I believe that we can make our subject matter come to life by bringing real world samples into the classroom. So next time you are thinking about how to spice up your lesson, consider bringing something with you and make your class come alive.

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