

Watch children **play**. They easily slip into **imaginary worlds** of their own creation. If they are lucky, they live and learn in an environment that **nurtures** this very natural quality of children's **play**. A **patch of grass** becomes an **island**. A **teeter totter** transforms into a **pirate ship**. A **stick** morphs into a **magical staff of power**. **Rocks** and **acorns** are gathered to create a **feast**.

Watch children comer, beber, jugar, descubrir.

eat, drink, play, discover

engaging the imagination through the senses to discover spanish-speaking cultures

At Sonrisas Spanish School, we're interested in finding ways to teach children in the way children actually learn. Our mission is to create high quality, standards-based Spanish classes and curriculum materials that are both effective for teachers and also provide a positive foreign language learning experience for students. We value the human communication that a teacher provides, and we believe that this type of learning is much more effective than media-based programs. It is only through the human interaction of a teacher guiding students through a lesson that all of the senses are used. The senses then engage the imagination. The more this is done, the more effortless both teaching and learning feels.

My husband Brooks and I started Sonrisas Spanish School as an after-school enrichment program in Austin, Texas area elementary schools in 1996. Our classes were informed by the ESL techniques, TPR, and the Natural Approach that we had used as bilingual teachers in the Austin Independent School District, as well as the foreign language methodologies used in Waldorf Schools across the country. Over the years our number of students, our experience and expertise, and our family grew. Noting a paucity of high quality Spanish curriculum for preschool and elementary, we published Sonrisas Spanish School: An Early Childhood Spanish Language Curriculum in 2002. In 2005 we moved our family and our school to my hometown in Southwestern Colorado to be closer to family where, in Pagosa Springs, we expanded our school to include Spanish classes for not just elementary school children, but adults as well. In 2009 we published our second curriculum, Sonrisas Spanish School: An Elementary Spanish Cultural Curriculum. For the last several years, teachers at Sonrisas Spanish School have been using this curriculum to teach cultural lessons in which students and teachers take imaginary trips to Spanish-speaking countries. In the context of these lessons the students engage their imagination through the senses in order to discover Spanish-speaking cultures.

Because not everyone reading this article speaks Spanish, the examples for the language directives will be written in English. As a

language teacher engaged in a lesson, however, the teacher is always speaking in the target language.

THE JOURNEY

Each of these lessons begins with a globe, treated with the same care and reverence as a crystal ball. As the teacher holds the globe carefully in her hands, she finds home on the globe. Her finger finds the location of her town on the globe as she says: "Children, here

we are in Pagosa Springs, Colorado....." She slowly moves her finger from home towards the country they'll be traveling to on an imaginary trip as she says: "We cross land, we cross water, and finally we arrive.....here on the island of Cuba." Then she gives the globe to one of her students and asks: "Maria, where's home? Where are we now? Show me how we get from here to Cuba." She lets a few students show her with their fingers how to get from home to Cuba so that she knows they are following her. She asks another student:

"Juan, show me water on the globe. Show me land. When we travel to Cuba do we have to cross water?" Then she reaches into her basket and pulls out a toy bicycle. "Class, is it possible to travel to Cuba from here by bicycle?" When they answer she reinforces their answer as she points to the ocean: "No, of course not! Bicycles can't travel over water." She does the same with a toy car, bus, train, boat, and airplane. Then she asks: "Class, how should we travel to Cuba today?" If they say airplane, her students create a plane right there in the classroom, much the way they create airplanes on the playground. They place two rows of chairs in the center of the room with a walkway down the middle for the flight attendant to serve drinks and snacks. The teacher passes out plane tickets and passports (made by the students in a previous class) and has them line up to get on the plane. She provides as much detail as possible to their plane trip, asking them to fasten their seatbelts, and offering them peanuts and beverages after take off. She has them look out their windows at the ocean below. She asks them to prepare for landing. By the time they exit the plane in Cuba their imaginations are already open and ready for any experiences the teacher presents to them.



This same routine, starting with a look at the globe, can be repeated before every cultural lesson. Once her students know this routine, she can expand upon it. She compares one country to another. (Which country is closer to us: Mexico or Spain? Which is larger: Argentina or Costa Rica?) She compares transportation modes. (Which method would be faster: airplane or bus?) She lets her students infuse their imaginations into the journey. One of her classes wants to travel to Spain on a magic carpet. Why not?

By starting each lesson with an imaginary journey, children are put at ease as we engage them in an experience as natural to them as breathing: imaginary play. The stage is set for whatever lesson their teacher has in store.

ENGAGING THE SENSES

The senses provide a window between ourselves and the world around us. If we want our students to experience and not just learn about a country, it's essential to use the senses to create that cultural picture.

FEEL

When her students step off the imaginary airplane in Costa Rica, the teacher makes a dramatic gesture of fumbling through her bag to get a fan and starts fanning herself "Ay ay ay, it's HOT here!" she says. "What was the weather like when we left home?" (It happens to be snowing and freezing cold in Colorado when they go to Costa Rica.) "Not here! Here it's HOT and HUMID!" She begins fanning the student closest to her and asks if anyone else would like a fan. In their imaginations the students are all suddenly feeling as hot as she, and she has engaged their sense of touch. Can you see how different this playful experience effects the children as opposed to simply saying "Class, in Costa Rica it's hot and humid"? When we take a real trip to another place, our first experience is usually a contrast in the way the air feels on our body. Whether you are taking your students to the French Alps or Beijing, think about what that first experience of the air on skin would feel like and create that in their imaginations.

HEAR

As the teacher and students are all fanning themselves in Costa Rica, the teacher suddenly drops her fan and brings her hand to her ear. "Shhhhh. Listen," she says. When everyone's quiet she makes her best monkey sound. "A monkey! Let's see if we can find it. Let's go into the tropical rainforest." In a corner of the classroom she has taped pictures of plants and animals that live in a Costa Rican rainforest. "Where could that monkey be? Maybe these will help: telescopes!" She hands each student a cardboard toilet paper tube to help find the monkey. A student finds the monkey's picture on the wall. "Here!" he says, and they all look at the monkey. The teacher puts her hand to her ear "Listen," she says as she makes her best parrot sound. "I hear a parrot. Can you guys find it with your telescopes?" They go through the same routine with a jaguar and a frog, and finally rain.

When visiting imaginary Cuba, the teacher does the same introduction and drops her fan to bring her hand to her ear, but instead of making an animal noise, she presses play on the CD player and plays some traditional Cuban music. "I hear Cuban music. What instruments do you hear? Does anyone feel like dancing?"

In Spain they hear flamenco and in Argentina they hear tango. The teacher does her best to represent the dancing style of the country and gets her students moving their bodies. Some teachers take this time to play an instrument that is traditional in the culture they are visiting.

SEE

To engage the visual imaginations of her students, a teacher uses books, photographs, memories, and contrast and comparison. Before the lesson begins she asks herself, "What do I want my students to see in the country we journey to? How does this experience contrast visually with the students' home town?" When she takes her children on their imaginary trip to Spain, she reads *A comer*, written by



Ana Zamorano and illustrated by Julie Vivas. In addition to having fantastic, manageable dialogue for the emerging Spanish speaker, it's a beautifully illustrated depiction of the food and culture of a Spanish village. She shows her students the pictures of the village buildings that are clearly hundreds of years old and asks her students: "Does this village look like our town? How is it different or the same? Are the buildings taller or shorter? Do we have castle ruins in our town? Do these buildings look older or newer than the buildings in our town?"

In Costa Rica she focuses on colors. Going into a rainforest offers a visual assault of color—especially green. When she takes her students into the imaginary rainforest she asks them: "What colors do you see?" She encourages them to tell her each color they see on the scarlet macaws, quetzals, and toucans. They linger on the dreamy iridescent blue morpho butterfly. Jan Brett has a beautifully illustrated book called *La sombrilla* that presents the brilliant experience of color in a Costa Rican Cloud forest. The teacher shows her students the pictures and asks them what colors they see. She contrasts this complex visual experience with the very simple experience of color in Colorado in the winter: white snow, brown and dark green trees, and blue sky.

In Argentina the teacher focuses on the fact that many parts of Argentina are very similar to Colorado as they are the same distance south from the equator as Colorado is north. So while they are in Argentina they see the opposite season that they are experiencing in Colorado. On the imaginary trip to Argentina in the fall, they go to where snow is melting and trees are blooming. In winter, Argentines are going to the beach for swimming and gardens are growing. The teacher has her students imagine what their own town looks like in the opposite season, and that becomes their visual experience of Argentina.

SMELL AND TASTE

I'm sure we can all relate to the experience of an olfactory journey. The scent of your grandmother's perfume on a stranger propels you into her living room; the fragrance of a gardenia takes you back to

tropical vacation you once took; the smell of apples takes you to a fall apple-picking harvest. The smells trigger the memories. In the imaginary journey to a Spanish-speaking country, if you can give your students the opportunity to smell and taste, the experience etches into the memory. In Spain students eat typical Spanish tapas. In Costa Rica they eat gallo pinto. In Cuba they eat tropical fruits. In Argentina they drink yerba maté. In Mexico they drink Mexican hot chocolate. A year after the lesson if you ask your students about their imaginary trip to Spain, chances are the first thing they will say is “We ate manchego and olives.” As a teacher, you can use the sense of taste and smell to trigger the memory of the cultural and linguistic experience.

THE LINGUISTIC JOURNEY

In Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, the first standard is communication:

Communication

Communicate in Languages Other than English

- *Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.*
- *Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.*
- *Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.*

As a foreign language teacher planning a lesson, when I keep the standards in mind, my lessons elicit both useful and meaningful language from my students. I keep them posted above my desk to encourage and reference them often while I plan.

In their book *Languages and Children: Making the Match* Carol Ann Dahlberg and Helena Curtain define the “functional chunk” as a memorized and unanalyzed phrase of high frequency. (p.48) The imaginary cultural journey lends itself perfectly to teaching useful language chunks. These useful language chunks should be informed by the standards for communication listed above.

Even before taking the journey, the globe activity solicits meaningful Spanish dialogue. The following dialogue is an example of an instructional Spanish exchange in which the teacher engages her students in a conversation, and finishes the conversation with confidence that her students fully comprehend the language:

Teacher: María, where’s our town?
María: Here.
Teacher: Juan, our town is here? (Points to the location of their town on the globe.)
Juan: Yes.
Teacher: Samuel, our town is here or there? (Teacher points to their town location and a random point on globe.)
Samuel: Our town is here. (Points to our town.)
Teacher: Guillermo, our town is there? (Points to random spot on globe.)
Guillermo: No, our town isn’t there, it’s here. (Pointing on globe.)

Once the teacher has determined that her students not only know where their town is located on the globe, but also that they can talk about it confidently in Spanish, she goes through the same series of questions with the goal of having her students locate the target country. Then she moves on to the next step:

Teacher: Soon we are going to travel from our town to Spain. (Drags finger around globe to Spain.)
Ana: Ana, do we cross land?
Ana: Yes.

Teacher: Bea, do we cross sea?
Bea: Yes.
Teacher: Francisco, reach in my basket and chose one of the modes of transportation for us to travel to Spain. (He pulls out a boat.) Francisco, is it possible to travel from our town to Spain by boat?
Francisco: Yes.
Teacher: Lupe, is it possible to cross the sea in a boat?
Lupe: Yes
Teacher: Pablo, is it possible to cross land in a boat?
Pablo: No. (Teacher gives Pablo the basket.)
Teacher: Look in my basket and chose a mode of transportation in which we can cross land. (Pablo takes out a car.)
Teacher: Talia, is it possible to cross land in a car?
Talia: Yes.
Teacher: Carlos, is it possible to cross sea in a car?
Carlos: No.
Teacher: We must travel across land and sea to reach Spain, so we must travel by car and boat. (Teacher places boat and car in front of José) José, choose which mode of travel we will use to cross land.
José: Car
Teacher: Lili, we will cross the land in a car?
Lili: Yes.
Teacher: Isabel, we will cross the land in a boat or a car?
Isabel: We cross the land in a car. We cross the sea in a boat.
Teacher: Yes! Lupe, how do we cross the sea?
Lupe: In a boat.

The above example focuses on the following language chunks:

Dónde está?	Where is...?
(No) está aquí.	It’s (It isn’t) here.
Es posible	Is it/It’s possible
Viajamos en coche/barco.	We travel in car/boat.
Viajamos por la tierra/océano	We travel over land/ocean.

Once the teacher is sure her students are with her she can move on to the journey itself with confidence that all of her students can 1) identify Spain on the map, 2) tell her what major geographical features lie between their home and Spain, and 3) talk about at least one way of traveling across the geographic bodies to get to Spain. These are all meaningful language chunks that have been conveyed to the students in the target language. The imaginary trips lend themselves to covering many valuable phrases that are used in daily conversations. As a teacher you can take any language chunk that you want your students to gain confidence with and structure a dialogue around that concept. Take your time when introducing a new phrase, checking often for understanding. And always come back to review the concept in subsequent lessons.

THE STANDARDS

In addition to the communication standard discussed above, the imaginary trip to a Spanish speaking country addresses the remaining four standards. When each of a child’s senses is engaged, these standards are met in a way that doesn’t feel contrived or obligatory. Referring to the standards during lesson planning can actually enrich the depth of the lesson.

Cultures

- *Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures*

- *Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.*
- *Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.*

During the imaginary trips students don't just learn about practices, they practice them. Likewise, they don't just learn about products, but rather they make them, taste them, and touch them. In this way it is as if they are in the shoes of someone actually in the country, experiencing that unique perspective.

Connections

Connect with Other Disciplines and Acquire Information

- *Standard 3.1: Students reinforce and further their knowledge of the other disciplines through foreign language.*
- *Standard 3.2: Students acquire information and recognize the distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its cultures.*

World geography and its climates are an obvious match for meeting this standard. In addition to this, students experience history, music, art, and (to an appropriate degree) political science during these imaginary trips. It is through the experiences within the imaginary journeys that the distinctive viewpoint of a foreign language can be understood. For example, through the experience of listening to Cuban music, creating maracas, and then playing and dancing along, students experience Cuba from the cultural viewpoint that would be impossible without the experience.

Comparisons

Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

- *Standard 4.1: Students demonstrate understanding of the nature of language through*
- *comparisons of the language studied and their own.*
- *Standard 4.2: Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through*
- *comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.*

During the imaginary trips, children experience climate, food, drinks, and holiday customs of the countries they visit. These can often provide a stark contrast or a surprising similarity to their home culture. It's very natural in the context of these experiences to ask questions like "How do you celebrate Christmas?" or "Do you eat tamales at Christmas time?" or "Does yerba maté taste like tea you've had before?" or "How is el Día de los Muertos different/similar to Halloween?" or "How does this country look different than the country you live in?" By looking at each experience in relation to their own culture, students deepen their understanding and their openness to another culture.

Communities

Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home and Around the World

- *Standards 5.1: Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.*
- *Standard 5.2: Students show evidence of becoming lifelong learners by using the language for personal enjoyment and enrichment.*

In each journey the students create an art project that directly reflects the culture of that country (a maraca in Cuba, papel picado in Mexico, a gauchada in Argentina, etc.). Taking home a "souvenir" from the country creates a context at home for talking about the cultural experience they had in Spanish class. This standard is most effectively met with parent involvement. In my class I send home a weekly report for parents to stay connected to what their children are learning in Spanish. In each report I give them a suggestion for community connection. This can be as simple as looking at labels in grocery store for olives, clementines, almonds, tortillas, etc. and finding the words *hecho en España* or *producido en México*. It can

be as involved as teaching your students a traditional Mexican folk dance and performing in a local Cinco de Mayo festival. I often give the parents functional language chunks to incorporate into their home life.

LIFE-LONG LEARNERS

*"Through the inner flexibility of their speech organ, the children find their way to a flexibility of soul and an openness that has an effect on their entire later life and especially on their social abilities. The foreign language lesson is suited like practically no other lesson to encourage openness and awaken interest for what is foreign to oneself—and in our time of widespread racism and social conflict on both a small and large scale this is a pedagogical mission of the first order."*¹ – Rudolph Steiner

When a teacher sees a shift of perspective in her students, and language and cultures that were once perceived as "other" or "foreign" become familiar and understood, she has succeeded not only in her linguistic goals for her students, but also in creating what Rudolf Steiner refers to above as "a flexibility of soul and an openness." It is this quality of foreign language study that creates life-long learners. When a teacher engages her students' imaginations through the senses, she sees an inner spark ignite. Her students' hearts open to the rich diversity of experiences available in the world.



RESOURCES

Curtain, H., & Dahlberg, C.A. (2004), *Languages and Children: Making the Match.*

Ferrer, E., Salusso, C., and Silvestry, E. (2000) *Senderos.*

Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century. (1999).



■ **BLUE LINDNER**, a certified bilingual elementary school teacher and mother of two, has been teaching Spanish to children for 14 years. She lived in Costa Rica and studied Latin American culture, history, and politics at the University of Costa Rica in San José. In 1996 she founded Sonrisas Spanish School where she teaches Spanish to children ages 3 to 12 years old, as well as training Spanish teachers. She and her husband Brooks Lindner, also a bilingual and Spanish teacher, have published two curricula—a preschool and elementary Spanish curriculum called *Sonrisas Spanish School: An Early Childhood Spanish Curriculum*, and a second curriculum called *Sonrisas Spanish School: An Elementary Spanish Cultural Curriculum*. The curricula are available at www.sonrisasspanishschool.com.