

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

Title: Target Language and Vocabulary Use for Advanced Level Spanish
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School: Byram Hills High School

SUMMARY OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context

I currently teach Spanish IV Commerce to upper level Spanish students (juniors and seniors) who have successfully completed and passed level III Spanish. The course is designed to introduce students to “real-world” language and culture so that students can master “need-to-know” language for the purposes of business. Among some of the topics covered are:

- The importance of the Spanish language
- Cultural protocol in Spanish-speaking countries
- Interviewing skills and procedures in Spanish-speaking countries
- The international stock market
- Finance
- Global trade
- Economics
- Advertising and marketing to the Hispanic market
- Travel to Spanish-speaking countries

The topics above require the mastery of highly specialized vocabulary used specifically for conducting business in Spanish. Since the course’s inception three years ago, I have identified a strong need to motivate students to retain and utilize this vocabulary. In addition, I am very interested in having students speak in the target language more frequently in the classroom. The use of this vocabulary and the ability to speak the target language more are the two issues I studied in my action research.

Action Plan

Based on these issues I formulated the following research question: What methods might I implement into the instruction of Spanish IV Commerce to better ensure that students utilize the target language and specialized vocabulary?

To support this inquiry, I read an article from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which emphasized the need to use the target

language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time. I also read a publication, titled, *Keeping Teacher and Student Talk in the Target Language*, by Charlene Pilio of the University of Wisconsin, Madison in which she notes the importance of role play for advanced students. She suggests creating some controversial issue (for example, gender roles in the workplace) and giving students cards with different points of view.

In addition to reading, I also conducted two surveys among World Language colleagues and Spanish IV Commerce students. The survey among my colleagues focused on questions dealing with the methods and strategies for encouraging the use of the target language in the classroom. The student survey inquired about the ability to retain vocabulary after specific time periods, i.e., one month, three months, etc. I also interviewed the district's ESL teacher. The interview included primarily strategies and techniques used to help students of other languages learn English. These surveys and the interview provided me with some valuable suggestions on how students can better retain Spanish vocabulary in the classroom.

Results

The action research taught me that the use of the target language in the foreign language classroom is a general concern among teachers. One teacher commented: *"Comprehension checks are important because most students "tune out" after a few minutes of us talking in the target language."*

I also learned that I am using some of the suggestions I obtained from the literature I read, e.g., workplace scenarios. In speaking with the ESL teacher, I learned that teaching less vocabulary might be more valuable to ensure retention and utilization in the classroom. She also suggested to *"teach vocabulary in context"*. From my student surveys, I clearly learned that if vocabulary is not practiced in context after three months or less, retention is almost impossible. Students indicated a strong need to use the highly specialized vocabulary in a contextual setting on a more regular basis. One student commented: *"Most vocabulary is used primarily for a test on a specific subject and then never brought up again."* Another student said: *"I find that words learned as far back as six months are sometimes hard to remember because they are not always used or reinforced regularly in class."*

Implications

There are three conclusions I drew from my action research:

- *Less is more.* Instead of giving students expansive lists of highly specialized vocabulary, focus on key business terminology necessary to use on a regular basis and incorporate into every lesson in a contextual setting. (ESL teacher – teach 7-10 words per lesson in context). Students will recall less words taught in context than expansive list of vocabulary taught outside of context.
- *Creativity is key.* Students will retain highly specialized vocabulary if encouraged to create their own sentences containing the new vocabulary. This is especially more effective if done in a contextual setting.
- *Personal is pivotal.* Students will retain highly specialized vocabulary more if they are asked to develop their own *personal dictionary* in which they list and define

the vocabulary. In this way, students can create any pneumonic devices that will aid them in recalling the vocabulary words.

Future research might focus on the results of implementing these three conclusions into practice and their benefits on student retention of highly specialized vocabulary in the Spanish IV Commerce classroom.