

Short-form Article

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Making Authentic Literary Texts Relevant, Meaningful, and Fun in Advanced Beginner and Intermediate Spanish-language Classrooms

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Introduction

The incorporation of literary texts in advanced beginner and intermediate level language classrooms (high school Spanish, years 2–4; university Spanish, semesters 2–4) can seem intimidating. Teachers worry about students' ability to understand texts linguistically and to interpret them culturally. Additionally, the thoughtful exploration of literary texts takes time away from other content, specifically grammar and vocabulary, which often seem more straightforward to teach due to the plethora of instructional and assessment tools already available. Lastly, the accessibility of the literary texts found in some text books, and the lack of complete instructional materials for instructors to teach these texts, might discourage instructors from including literary texts in course curriculum.

Despite these challenges, it is important to include literary texts at the advanced beginner and intermediate levels for three reasons. First, literary texts present grammar points and vocabulary in context, which actively supports language acquisition, for example, by highlighting the uses of the preterite and the imperfect. Second, literature is the verbal representation of the target culture; literary texts communicate emotions, perceptions, and human experiences in a way a verb chart cannot. A compelling case for the role of literature in the development of world citizens is made by the philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, who argues that literature simulates a reader's "narrative imagination," which in turn allows the reader to feel empathy for others. Third, successful engagement with literary texts in the advanced beginner and intermediate stages of language study sets students up for continued success in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and upper-division university language coursework.

ACTFL's "Guiding Principles for Language Learning" explicitly promote the benefits of literature in the foreign language curriculum. Gillian Lazar argues that authentic literature exposes students to "complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language" and is "more absorbing than the pseudo-narratives frequently found in course books" (15). Similarly, Jonathan P. A. Sell encourages L2 teachers to reject fiction authored specifically for the language learner in favor of authentic literary texts, citing its representation of language and culture to be more genuine, and ultimately, more beneficial and interesting to the learner. A well-chosen literary text "can be an effective tool for stimulating and achieving language learning and equipping learners with relevant linguistic and socio-cultural competence" (91–92). In addition to the linguistic authenticity of literature, its emotional authenticity is motivating to the reader and demands a "personal response" (Kousompou 75).

In considering specifically *how* to approach teaching literary texts, Sanju Choudhary describes two approaches for L2 literary analysis. The first of these, reader-response, "demystifies" literature by encouraging readers to make personal connections. The second is a language-based



approach, which focuses language instruction and production related to the literature. Both strategies, he concludes, have value. Lazar's *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers* provides many resources to guide teachers through the selection of texts and activities to support language acquisition, comprehension, and oral fluency in L2 learners, including those at the lower levels. Janet Swaffar and Katherine Arens's chapters 3 and 4 are also particularly useful resources for the selection and instruction of literature at the lower levels.

Selecting and teaching a literary text successfully requires, like all good teaching, thoughtful and intentional lesson design. Teachers need to ask the following questions to understand the challenges the text presents to students and to identify the goals the teacher has for student learning:

1. Is the text thematically appropriate? The text must be relevant and accessible to the audience; relatable themes will lead to student success, whereas abstract, philosophical, or overly mature themes will tend to frustrate them. Sometimes the most canonical literary works are not the best fit for advanced beginner and intermediate students.
2. What vocabulary and grammar will students need to know to understand the text? What words and language structures do students already confidently know? What vocabulary and grammar can they be expected to decode on their own using reading strategies such as context clues and cognates? What vocabulary and grammar will need to be glossed? (There is no magic number of how many footnotes is too many, but each word students seek in the footnotes disrupts their reading and is a reminder to them of how much they do not understand.)
3. How sophisticated are the literary devices used in the work? Advanced beginner and intermediate students will likely be able to identify certain devices such as metaphors, similes, repetition, and alliteration. Complex imagery, however, should be avoided.
4. What will students need to know about the culture, the author, or the work itself before reading the text? Advanced beginner and intermediate students likely have limited knowledge of Hispanic cultures and the literary context of the work.
5. How much time do I have? Pacing is a serious consideration. Too often, literature is squeezed into the curriculum. Without time to engage in meaningful activities before, during, and after reading, teachers and students often feel rushed and frustrated. At times, it is prudent to edit literary works for length (but never for language). In doing so, students can focus on one particular part of the text, for example a descriptive paragraph or a dialog between two characters.
6. What do I want students to understand about the work? What patterns or relationships (in language use, theme, or narrative or poetic structure) do I want students to identify? What comparisons do I want them to make? How will this text encourage and inspire my students?

The answers to these questions should direct the creation of activities for before, during, and after reading. While each teacher, classroom, and text require different support, the following activities provide a menu of choices that can be customized as needed.

Pre-reading Activities

Pre-reading activities are critical to setting students up for a positive experience with the target language and the culture.

The pre-teaching of vocabulary and grammar prior to engaging students directly with a literary text is essential, but the selection of the right activity will depend on whether students

will be recognizing information from prior instruction, intuitively decoding the information, or learning it for the first time. If students already recognize the vocabulary and grammar (but might be rusty), a warm-up, such as a crossword puzzle or online flashcards, may help students reactivate what they know. If students will be expected to decode, be sure to review reading strategies such as seeking cognates, identifying familiar stems, and using context clues such as time tags, tone, and theme to derive meaning. Students should only see a limited number of new words or grammar structures; if too much pre-teaching is required, students will be bored and disheartened before they even interact with the text.

While it may be important to pre-teach the cultural and author contexts, as above, this should be limited in scope and length; any biographical and cultural pre-activity should be targeted and essential to understanding the text. Oftentimes, this information is not needed. However, when it is useful to the readers to have some additional background, consider using an image or series of images to spark students' understanding, for example, instead of reading about historical violence in Colombia, use a few images by the artist Fernando Botero as a conversation prompt.

It is also beneficial to foreshadow the theme of the text. Frequently it is possible to leverage the students' own feelings, experiences, and general knowledge. For example, by answering questions like, "How would you feel if . . ." or "Would you be afraid to . . .," students move mentally into the literary space of the text prior to starting to read. In some cases, students can interpret or react to an image instead of a question with the same effect.

Pre-teaching imagery can be more complicated but is also important. Oftentimes, students have a great store of cultural associations for places, events, objects, colors, etc., but during the stress of reading in a second language they will not access that information. By asking them in advance, for example, "What does the color white symbolize?" or "What words would you use to describe a swan?" students can be primed for making those connections when they are reading. Frequently students' linguistic abilities are not at pace with their interpretive skills. One technique to help students express nuanced ideas more precisely is to provide a word bank. This enables students to recognize and to choose words that they cannot independently produce and allows them to articulate richer and more precise observations. Another excellent strategy is to provide an image. For example, when teaching "Verso XXXIX" by José Martí, giving students the translations of the words *cardo* (thistle) and *ortiga* (nettle) may not be productive; without a background in botany, they will not derive the symbolism in either language. However, well-chosen images that highlight the characteristics of the plants will help students to understand the poet's message.

Another helpful strategy for pre-teaching can be to use a word cloud (there are numerous word cloud generators on the web). This tool presents the text in a visual way that accentuates words that repeat and can help to forecast key ideas and themes. For example, Figure 1 shows a word cloud for "Proverbios y cantares, XXIX" by Antonio Machado. Students will immediately notice the words *caminante* and *camino*, and start to forecast the theme by drawing associations with the verb *caminar*. The teacher can also check for understanding of other words (for example, *sino* and *huellas*) that students may not know or immediately recall.

Lastly, it can be very beneficial to have students listen to the literary text read aloud. While the teacher may choose to read it, other options are to record a colleague (thus giving students exposure to another speaker's voice, especially useful if the work's voice has a gender identity that is different from the teacher's) or to find a recording on the internet (occasionally it is even possible to find the work read by the author him or herself). Students tend to read (both aloud and silently to themselves) in monotone, but by hearing the work, they will be preconditioned to anticipate tone and pacing, and will be more likely to make note of rhyme, repetition, and alliteration (see Appendix A for another type of pre-reading activity).



Figure 1. Word cloud of Antonio Machado's "Proverbios y cantares, XXIX"

During-reading Activities

As students work through the literary text, carefully designed activities will enhance their comprehension, provide focus, and develop their analytical skills.

Chunking text is one of the most effective things a teacher can do when teaching a literary text, especially prose, drama, or longer poems. Breaking the text into smaller segments makes it less intimidating to students and allows them (and the teacher) to check for understanding along the way. Chunking the text also means the footnotes can be grouped more closely with the text, making them more accessible and useful.

Highlighting important parts of the text is also very helpful in drawing students' attention to an author's word choice or grammatical usage. For example, while students at this level may conceptually understand the uses of *tú* and *Usted*, they are unlikely to notice shifts between the two that a more advanced reader would perceive and interpret. However, if students' attention is pointedly directed to these words, they are more likely to notice them and to recognize the cultural significance.

Graphic organizers are another very useful tool. Students can complete graphic organizers to help identify relationships: a family tree, a timeline, before and after, causes and effects, etc. A graphic organizer can also help students to make comparisons or find patterns, for example, the duality of Julia de Burgos and her alter ego in the poem "A Julia de Burgos." Graphic organizers can be left entirely blank for the students to complete, or partially filled in by the teacher if students require greater scaffolding.

Visuals can also support students' comprehension and interpretation. For example, the beginning of Carmen Laforet's novel *Nada* is very descriptive ("El olor especial, el gran rumor de la gente, las luces siempre tristes . . ."). However, most students will fail to note the author's multisensory language. By adding a simple visual showing a nose, an ear, a hand, an eye and a mouth, and asking students to circle which of the five senses are used in the description, intermediate readers' appreciation of the literary qualities of the text can be raised. Photographic or art images can also help students to fill gaps in understanding. For example, an image of a flower growing in harsh conditions will aid a student to visualize the lines "Tú creces de mi vida en el desierto/como crece en un páramo la flor" (Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, "Rima XCII"). With the support of the image, students lacking experience and confidence are more likely to have that gratifying "aha moment" while reading the text.

After-reading Activities

It is important to leave time after a reading to check for understanding, to promote higher order thinking, and to give students time to reflect and to make lasting, personal connections with the text.

Manipulatives are excellent for kinesthetic learners and a nice change of pace for all students. While manipulatives can feel like a game, they can be used effectively for a variety of purposes, such as plot ordering (put slips of paper with plot developments into chronological order) or assigning personality traits or actions written on cards to specific characters. These kinds of activities can be used for any kind of information that can be ordered, sorted, ranked, or categorized.

Another activity that allows students to interact with the text in a physical way is a gallery walk. Here, students can be asked to match quotes from the text with a number of images posted around the room that represent events, emotions, or characters. Or, students can view the images and narrate orally or in writing what part of the text they associate with the image and why.

Creating a personal visual is another excellent interpretive activity for students. A comic strip format that asks students to present key points in the narration is an excellent way to check for understanding. Or, having students create an image that represents a specific moment in the literary work can help them to reach greater emotional depth. Some students may prefer to use stock images available on the internet while others may choose to use their own hand. Either way, students are thinking creatively and imaginatively about the text and seeking the best way to present it visually.

Performances can also be highly effective. These may take the form of a dramatic reading, a puppet show, or a performance video. Performances can be especially effective for literary works where there is real drama that students can get excited about. Students will be able to give an authentic voice to a scene of family conflict from Rodolfo Usigli's play *El niño y la niebla*. The polyphonic nature of Nicolás Guillén's poem "Sensemayá" lends itself very well to performance (the investment in a stuffed animal snake that can be ritually sacrificed is worthwhile).

Intermediate students can also be asked to express their interpretation by writing the poem or story from another perspective (for example, the snake in "Sensemayá"). Alternatively, they can write the next scene or a different conclusion, or write to the author with follow-up questions, advice, or a response (the "Hombre pequeño" in Alfonsina Storni's poem of the same name can pen a reply to the poet).

The inclusion of music is another way to enrich students' interpretive experiences and practice listening skills, as well. The internet has a huge array of videos of poems set to music in settings ranging from classical to heavy metal and every musical genre in between. Ask students to react to the musical adaptation, for example, "Are the lyrics identical to poem, and if not, why do you think they are different?" "Does the music change the way you think about the reading?" "Do you like the interpretation?" "Do you think the original author would?" Students can also be asked to think of a song they know that they think expresses the same ideas as the work and to justify their comparison (see Appendix B for another type of after-reading activity).

Conclusion

In conclusion, literature can and should be taught at the advanced beginner and intermediate levels, but assessing the content and language of the text, and clearly understanding what students should learn is critical. This understanding will allow the teacher to design the right scaffolding activities to support students' exploration of the text and to enhance their understanding and interpretation. Literature can be an exciting and purposeful component of advanced beginner and intermediate curricula, and when incorporated thoughtfully, students will benefit linguistically and personally from the experience.



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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Antes de leer: *Nada* de Carmen Laforet

Imagina que viajaste todo el día y llegaste solo/a en una nueva ciudad. ¿Cómo te sientes? (Pon círculos)

triste	curioso	feliz
alegre	ansioso	infeliz
animado	cansado	entusiasmado
aburrido	energético	independiente
emocionado	tímido	preocupado

Appendix B

"La viuda de Montiel"

Después de leer: Una lápida para José Montiel

Opción A: Imagina que eres del pueblo. Escribe una inscripción para la lápida y adórnala según tu percepción de José Montiel.

Opción B: Imagina que eres la viuda de Montiel. Escribe una inscripción para la lápida y adórnala según tu percepción de José Montiel.

